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*Michael Robert Armstrong*

**Lay Christian Views of Life After Death: A Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal of the ‘Ordinary Eschatology’ of Some Congregational Christians**

**ABSTRACT**

The thesis investigates the life after death (hereafter LAD) beliefs of members of my Congregational church via in-depth semi-structured interviews. Complementary criteria of critical reflection and visible effect on behaviour are used to identify these views as ‘ordinary theology’. It is argued that the disclosed ‘ordinary eschatology’ provides a valuable commentary on both the current theological norm of protestant Christian tradition and contemporary academic debate. Ordinary theologians can be considered as *Spirit signal processors* for the church: a claim based on a view of *continuing* revelation, the changing living tradition of the church, and the nature of doctrine as ‘regulative principle’.

Protestant doctrine and funeral liturgy is not entirely clear about LAD, so this is supplemented with a particular view of ‘life *after* LAD’ to provide a comparative ‘norm’. The present data shows a significant disjunction with this norm in several key areas. Ordinary eschatology does not envisage a physical afterlife or final re-embodiment of the dead: the afterlife is an immediate soul-spirit existence. Jesus’ resurrection is not regarded as directly relevant to the nature of human afterlife but rather was to confirm his person and message.

These ordinary theologians are deeply sceptical of scholarly and ecclesial authority, and their attitudes suggest a failure on the part of church and academy to convey the results of academic scholarship. Ordinary eschatology challenges the contemporary theological trend of denying a substantial soul, and questions some interpretations of key biblical texts concerning LAD. These ordinary theologians also frequently report experiences of supernatural phenomena: continuing contact with the known dead is especially important.

The listening process used to disclose this ordinary theology has great benefit and could be applied in other congregations and contexts. There is an identified desire among these ordinary theologians for LAD to become a more common and routine topic of church conversation.

TITLE PAGE

**Lay Christian Views of Life After Death: A  
Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal of the  
‘Ordinary Eschatology’ of Some Congregational  
Christians**

by

Michael Robert Armstrong

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Theology and Ministry

Department of Theology and Religion

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64,951 words

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# 1. WHY A STUDY OF THE AFTERLIFE BELIEFS OF ORDINARY CHRISTIAN PEOPLE?

## 1.1 EXPERIENCE OF ORDINARY PASTORAL MINISTRY

It is perhaps not immediately obvious why the views of members of an ordinary Congregational church concerning ‘life after death’ (hereafter referred to as LAD) should be of interest and importance.

A key pastoral and theological issue for me during twenty-five years of ministry has been the unrelenting presence in ordinary human lives of suffering and death. I have conducted numerous funerals over this period, usually involving members of my own congregation but often also involving people less familiar with church practice. In these I have talked of everlasting life, and have usually sought to outline a meaningful theodicy. These events are often the clearest examples of direct pastoral connection between minister and congregation. I have always felt that funerals require the most intense effort of pastoral empathy, the clearest expression of theology, and a comprehensive understanding of the human situation. Funerals are the church laid bare, the church dealing with the ultimate questions of human existence. They are also occasions of great pastoral opportunity for the church. In a very real sense, whenever Christians are confronted by the proximity of death, practical theology is paramount. The minister or priest stands between the Christian tradition and the immediate pastoral human situation. But this is never a one-way process of simply ‘applying’ the tradition in an appropriate way to the situation. I have always felt, rather, that it is to seek to hold the two together in ‘creative conversation’. In fact, this exercise of ministry is fundamentally hermeneutic in nature; each side being influenced by, and in turn influencing, the other. My understanding of the tradition has changed as well as my understanding of human need in Christian bereavement.<sup>1</sup>

More eminent theologians express similar experiences. Jürgen Moltmann relates a ‘painfully embarrassing’ memory.

Ernst Bloch had just died. He was a neighbour of ours, and I went over at once to speak to his wife. She came toward me and simply asked, ‘Where is he now?’ His body was still in the house. For the moment I was without

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<sup>1</sup> A full account of my methodological approach is given below – see Chapter 2, and Appendix E.

an answer. But I have learned that this ‘where’ question is important for the people left behind, because without an answer they cannot hold fast to fellowship with ‘the beloved person’ (as Bloch’s wife called her Ernst).<sup>2</sup>

McDannell and Lang point to the personal correspondence of Karl Rahner which assures a female friend that LAD is a real social experience; and to Dietrich Bonhoeffer assuring a small boy that his dead dog is in heaven. The point McDannell and Lang make is that while theological professionals argue for theocentric views of heaven in public (from the tradition), in private they accept and recognise that anthropocentric views are also valid and important (in a pastoral context).

Even those well acquainted with the New Testament tradition, who expect to participate (to the exclusion of all else) in God’s spiritual perfection after death, cannot fully maintain this position. The most spiritually rigorous among Christian thinkers have not been able to deny all social contact with other creatures in heaven. ... It seems that the religious studies professionals have more in common with the congregation in the pews than they would like us to believe.<sup>3</sup>

Another ever-present element of my ministry has been the attempt to understand suffering. An eschatological future of continuing personal existence is a necessary element of most Christian theological explanations of evil and suffering. In his classic collection on the theodicy debate, Stephen T. Davis says, ‘I do not believe that the problem of evil can be solved without crucial reference to the future.’<sup>4</sup> Two notable recent examples of theologians applying this view are John Polkinghorne<sup>5</sup> (a re-formation of physical matter and re-embodied existence from our ‘information patterns’), and Marilyn McCord Adams<sup>6</sup> (a heaven which God *must* provide for all to redeem the horrors of human life). Adams approaches the issue from a classical philosophical perspective and claims that all human lives face the ultimate need for eschatological explanation because of the challenge of death itself; a view which reflects my own pastoral experience. Many

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Is There Life After Death?’ in John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (eds.), *The End of The World and The Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 246-7.

<sup>3</sup> Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2001), xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen T. Davis, (ed.) *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, New Edition, 2001), 133.

<sup>5</sup> John C. Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

‘ordinary’ deaths of the elderly are neither good nor easy. It is not just the ‘tragic death of the young’ that needs explanation and understanding.

As a Christian minister I have a crucial responsibility with regard to helping people in situations of death and suffering, and I therefore need better to understand my task and opportunities. So, on the one hand, I will consider how the Christian tradition has been, can be, and should be understood in such contexts. On the other, I will investigate how the people I minister to perceive the death of loved ones in the context of their Christian faith. The questions I wish to pose are the following. In what ways do the people I minister to conceive of LAD? Where do their views come from, and how do they relate to the formal statements of church doctrine and funeral liturgies? How do they understand biblical teaching in this context? What has helped them understand and better cope with the death of loved ones? In what way, if any, has a theodicy been helpful?<sup>7</sup> Does what is said, done and taught by the ‘church at large’ in relation to LAD have a positive effect on ordinary Christian believers: is it supportive and confirming of their beliefs and practices, or in contradiction of them?

A key set of theological issues is therefore included in this discussion:

- **The nature of the human self.** Is it physical, spiritual (soul), or mental?
- **Continuity between this life and the afterlife.** Do we remember our earthly life? What is the purpose of the afterlife and how does it relate to our earthly experience? Do we continue to grow and develop in the afterlife?
- **The nature of the afterlife.** Is it ‘social’? Do we meet other human beings, ancestors and successors? If so, are our relationships with them the same? Are we aware of those still living earthly lives? If the new life is physical, what age and physical or mental state are we in? Does it last forever? What do we do?
- **The timing of the afterlife.** Is it immediate post-mortem, or is there a staged process?
- Does the afterlife in any way explain or compensate for **suffering** in this life?

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of a meaningful theodicy in pastoral terms has recently been challenged strongly from the perspective of practical theology – see John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

- What effect does, or should, a belief in the afterlife have on our **earthly** life?
- **Is the afterlife the same for all?** Are there variations of the afterlife, related to some form of judgement?
- What is our **relationship with God** in the afterlife?
- Is there any other form of **animal life** in the afterlife?
- What is the **future of the physical** universe we live in now?
- **How do we know** anything about the afterlife?
- What does, or should, the **church teach** about the afterlife?

Such issues are important not just for academic theologians and members of the clergy, but also for all those who are simply members of churches and practitioners of faith. Such people lose loved ones to physical death, while trying to understand, believe, and put into practice the Christian gospel of LAD. I have stood beside such people in situations of bereavement for many years, and it is time I heard more clearly what they actually understand and believe in this context. However, my intention is not simply to check whether their reception of the tradition has been accurate. This would be to understand the matter in a unidirectional way; to consider only one side of the conversation. I want also to investigate whether and in what ways the views of such Christian people can actually comment critically on, or even change, the tradition itself. In other words, I wish to consider whether their views are of *theological importance*. In order to do this I will utilise the concept of ‘ordinary theology’.

## 1.2 ORDINARY THEOLOGY

Jeff Astley defines ‘ordinary theology’ as ‘the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education.’<sup>8</sup> His thesis is that the theology of un-taught practitioners is not just worth listening to, but is actually essential for the church to hear. Why should this be so?

Following Kierkegaard, Astley sees Christianity as a ‘method’ or a ‘way’. What we learn and how we learn are inextricably linked (theology as process, not

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<sup>8</sup> Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 1.

just product). Emotions are also involved; the role of *affect* is important. Hence, ‘I cannot be said fully – or perhaps even remotely – to understand, say, the doctrine of creation that I purport to embrace, unless I experience the appropriate affective states: feelings of dependence, contingency, gratitude and awe.’<sup>9</sup> The implication for belief in LAD is clear; such belief must be accompanied by affective states such as feelings of secure hope, and lack of fear. Astley argues that religious truth claims are *personal* claims of ultimate importance, *to us*; claims that affect us directly and intimately. This is in contrast to a more traditional theological approach which would stress what the religious practitioner should know about how God acts in relation to the whole of humanity, rather than to *me*. For Astley, religion is emotional, not just cognitive; without the subjective appropriation of religion in practice, it does not actually exist. In this sense, religion is ‘tried and tested’ by those who actually ‘do’ it, not by those who merely ‘think’ it. Astley claims that ‘belief-in’ is ‘belief-that’ with attitude (and relevant behaviour). Of course, this does not mean that religious truth is just a matter of personal opinion; there is an objective pole to religious truth. But something cannot be *religiously* true if not actually put into practice, in the ‘religious embrace’ where the subjective and the objective meet.<sup>10</sup>

To learn the faith, for Astley, is to move from ‘believing-that’ to ‘believing-in’. Knowledge *about* God must be distinguished from knowledge *of* God.

Context and process are very important; ‘theological truth’ is

received through, and only through, a process that is ... personal and idiosyncratic. And it is this sort of theology that is much more important for most people. Our embracing of faith compels us to speak here of the truth of theology as an ‘encountered truth’; it is the sort of truth that we do not just know, but are ‘in’.<sup>11</sup>

Real theological learning cannot be second-hand, but rather must be adopted and embraced with passion; not just accepting what others have said, but wrestling with this and making it our own. Theology is an activity which ultimately we must do ourselves, and cannot just be learned from how others have done it. The views of others are a valuable resource from which to learn, but as we adopt them, they become *our* views. We only believe what *we believe*.

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<sup>9</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Astley, ‘A Theological Reflection on the Nature of Religious Truth’ unpublished paper presented at the 2008 session of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values at Ankara University, Turkey.

<sup>11</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 36.

In a book written for protestant lay Christians (and preceding Astley's concept of 'ordinary theology'), the process theologian John Cobb argues that in order for church renewal to happen we first need to renew how lay people think within the church. Lay people need to recognise that they are already theologians in the sense that they have beliefs that affect their Christian lives. However, Cobb argues that lay people often get bogged down in their own uncertainties or what seem to them irrelevant traditional questions. Instead, they should discover and articulate the convictions that shape their lives, which 'requires a quite different starting point' and 'a kind of reflection to which most people are not accustomed'.<sup>12</sup> Using the ideas of others is not the way forward. 'The only place that authentic theology can begin is with the real beliefs of real Christians. Much may be wrong with those, but that is not the question. We can grow theologically only if we discover for ourselves that our beliefs are not adequate or appropriate.' If we are simply told that our views are unorthodox then we will not change; but we 'may change real beliefs on discovery of the reasons for the church's rejection of those beliefs in the past.'<sup>13</sup> Cobb argues that for the church to be vital, to be able to face current ethical and social issues, ordinary Christians need to become reflective believers, that is, to become 'clear about what we believe and why we believe it'.<sup>14</sup> However, ultimately Cobb fails to carry his argument further than urging ordinary Christians to discover their own 'authentic' theology in order better to understand the doctrines of the church and therefore adopt them, or not. There is little if any suggestion that this personal authentic theology can be of importance in a wider sense.

So is there anything else to ordinary theology? It is clearly important to understand the way in which people actually learn and interiorise their faith, but does this make their views valuable in any way other than as *their own* views? Why should we take the views of ordinary Christians seriously as *theology*?

### ***Is it 'Theological'?***

Astley accepts that even 'ordinary' theology should have applied to it 'a range of normative criteria of what Christian theological belief ought to be, including criteria representing norms of belief derived from Scripture, tradition

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<sup>12</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *Becoming a Thinking Christian* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 18

<sup>13</sup> Cobb, *Becoming a Thinking Christian*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Cobb, *Becoming a Thinking Christian*, 136.

and church order, as well as norms of rationality.’ He argues that ordinary theology ‘connects with the prescribed norms of Scripture, creeds and councils’, but only in the sense of the ongoing ‘critical conversation’ between ordinary believer and tradition, which is actually how tradition is changed and continually re-formed. However, in this critical conversation with the norms, ‘the believer’s beliefs will also challenge and may even, eventually and given a sharp enough bit of challenging, change what *counts* as the norm of belief.’<sup>15</sup> This is an important claim, and one which is directly relevant to this study. Are the views of members of my congregation, as ordinary theologians, so important as to be capable of challenging and even changing the accepted norms of Scripture, creeds, and councils with regard to LAD?

Astley believes that ‘theology is process as well as content, and therefore includes the set of *processes and practices of holding, developing, patterning and critiquing those beliefs, thoughts and discourse* [emphasis added]’. Ordinary theology is non-scholarly and non-academic, but –

Although the overwhelming majority of contemporary ‘God-talkers’ have not studied theology formally at all, they are inevitably engaged in doing their own theology if and when they speak and think about God, or at all events when they do so *with any seriousness* [emphasis added]. This is an acceptable claim if theology is essentially the attempt *to speak reflectively of the divine* [author’s emphasis], or more generically of what we worship.<sup>16</sup>

From this I conclude that if the views and opinions of ordinary theologians are to be regarded as ‘theology’ then there must be evidence of reflection on and evaluation of their own beliefs. In other words, what ordinary believers say about their faith is of value and potentially important for the wider faith community *only* if such talk about God is *the result of critical reflection* and not simply idle thoughts or unreflective opinion.

Astley claims that the academic theologian always begins life as an ordinary theologian.<sup>17</sup> He suggests that one reason we will find serious reflection among ordinary theologians is the way in which belief operates.

At a deep level, ordinary beliefs are usually taken very seriously by the people who have them. They own their belief because it is significant to

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<sup>15</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 56.

<sup>17</sup> I can relate this to my own experience as a person who had no upbringing in the church. My first interests in Christianity were as a very interested and curious adult who certainly undertook ordinary theology.

them, and it is significant to them because they own it. Ordinary theology is, almost by definition, a significant theology – to the ordinary believers who profess it. Our own theology is always that sort of thing; that is how belief works.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, ordinary theology is significant because it is forged in the face of real-life personal crises and challenges, rather than in detached academic contexts.

Facing the death of others and facing our own death (which is always a part of facing the death of others) fires the crucible of ordinary theologising. The resulting theology can powerfully express spirituality's concern with meaning. *It would be foolish, however, to assert that it always does* [emphasis added]. Ordinary theology, like academic theology, may be either profound or superficial, either positive or despairing, reflecting the people who are engaged in it.<sup>19</sup>

Astley accepts that religious beliefs

should not be called 'theology' unless they are to some extent articulated and reflected upon. But most believers engage in some measure of articulation and reflection; they *do* think about and 'think through' their faith, in their own way. And most people do see the problems, especially the 'intellectual' problems, in their faith; and they also care about having consistent beliefs and being able to justify them to themselves and others. Further, people can and do work out 'theological solutions' for themselves. ... And academic theology is not as impressively superior as it sometimes thinks it is in coming up with acceptable responses, when compared with the more ordinary sort of God-talk.<sup>20</sup>

Astley points to David Kelsey, who argues that congregations are 'constituted by a practice that is inherently *self-critical*.' Kelsey believes that 'the practice of worship of God inherently requires critical examination of whether and why we should engage ourselves in the Christian thing at all', and that congregations 'are therefore committed *as Christian congregations* to a continuing self-critique in the light of Christian and other norms.'<sup>21</sup> Astley also appeals to Richard Osmer, Dietrich Ritschl, and Charles M. Wood for support and concludes that

Actually it would be strange if ordinary theologians were *not* both reflective and critical. All human beings are concerned about the plausibility or 'believability' of their beliefs. Our beliefs need to be believable to us. A critical ('judging', 'assessing', 'evaluating') element is crucial if people are to *own* their faith. For most people, particularly in our culture, this will involve some reflective, rational examination of their

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<sup>18</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 139.

<sup>21</sup> David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's theological about a Theological School?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 141, cf. 206-7. Quoted in Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 140.



religious beliefs. ... For most adults anyway, if not perhaps all, formation in the faith must go along with 'Christian criticism'.<sup>22</sup>

Spirituality is also important for Astley; in fact beliefs and practices are secondary to it, but they influence our spirituality and are linked in a feedback loop. 'Thus religious people should, and mostly they do, think for themselves for spiritual reasons; adults must engage in critical reflection if they are to hold to adult beliefs that can express and inform an adult spirituality. Hence, ordinary believers must also engage in a theology that involves, in Barth's phrase, "taking rational trouble" over the mystery of God.'<sup>23</sup>

It seems, then, that Astley not only accepts that critical reflection is a necessary component of real ordinary theology, but that he expects it to be there. Ann Christie found this not to be the case with all the subjects she interviewed in her study of 'Ordinary Christology'. She found, 'that a few of her sample are highly resistant to any kind of critical reflection and evaluation of their faith'.<sup>24</sup> Christie utilises the affective dimension of ordinary theology in defence of the claim that her interviewees are 'doing' Christology, but nevertheless recognises that 'affective Christology that only entertains warm feelings is superficial.' So the subjective pole of ordinary theology of affective response (the necessary complement to the objective pole of formal theology and doctrine) must 'lead to volitional action, or to transformation of the person in any other way'.<sup>25</sup> Voas and Crockett make a similar point in the context of seeking to assess what 'believing without belonging' can actually mean. 'Many people in Britain have beliefs about the rights and wrongs of fox hunting, but comparatively few are either participants or protestors. It is not enough to find that people accept one statement of belief or another; unless these beliefs make a substantial difference in their lives, religion may consist of little more than opinions to be gathered by pollsters.'<sup>26</sup>

I suggest that we have, then, two complementary criteria for confirming whether or not ordinary *theology* is actually being done. On the 'objective-cognitive' side, the ordinary *theologian* must *demonstrate sufficient critical reflection*. This does not mean that the evaluative (critical) element of reflection

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<sup>22</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 142-3.

<sup>23</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> Ann Christie, 'Ordinary Christology: A Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal' (PhD thesis, University of Durham, 2005), 209.

<sup>25</sup> Christie 'Ordinary Christology', 214.

<sup>26</sup> David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', *Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2005), 14.

must be up to the standards of the academy, but rather that the ordinary theologian must show a serious attempt to engage with the cognitive issues of her beliefs.<sup>27</sup>

On the ‘subjective affective-volitional’ side, the ordinary *theologian* must also *demonstrate sufficient effect of the personal appropriation of her beliefs*. In other words, there must be a clear indication of an effect on their spirituality, feelings and therefore their behaviour, as a result of the holding of this belief; for example, a commitment or action. There is no simple way to measure such things.

However, accurate measurement is not necessary because the key thing to be identified is the complete or near absence of such criteria rather than an accurate measure of the extent to which they are present.

This study saw some examples of views about LAD that failed to display any recognisable level of critical reflection, and also some examples of ‘warm feelings’ about claimed beliefs without any recognisable personal effect.

However, it is also clear that for the vast majority of the subjects of this study, both the affective (subjective) and cognitive (objective) requirements of ordinary theology were met (see ‘Ordinary Theology Being Done’ on page 54, and ‘The Effect of Belief in LAD’ on page 132). The majority of those interviewed had clearly given significant prior thought to the issue, and nearly all exhibited surprising focus and critical reflection within the interview itself. The vast majority of subjects also gave clear and moving testimony to the difference that their *belief in LAD* made to them. It was rarely simply a case of their *belief that* there is LAD. Christie concluded in her study that ordinary Christology is about the stories of Jesus rather than the doctrines about him; and about right practice rather than right belief. So people can be Christian ‘without having to give assent to (or even understand) the christological doctrines of the church.’ So the important question to ask believers is not who is Jesus, but do you follow him?<sup>28</sup> Doctrine and biblical teaching concerning LAD are less clear than they are for Christology. I therefore encouraged interviewees to answer not only what their belief in LAD is, but also what, if anything, it means for them.

There is one final point to consider with respect to our confidence that ordinary theology is being done. In this study there was little evidence of the use of Scripture by interviewees to explain or support their views of LAD. This could

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<sup>27</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 138-45.

<sup>28</sup> Christie ‘Ordinary Christology’, 260.

be seen as a critical challenge to the claim that ordinary theology was being done. It could be argued that Astley fails to make explicit any essential role for the Bible for ordinary Christian theologians. Yet his requirement for critical reflection on the part of ordinary theologians, and his insistence on a truly theological evaluation of ordinary theology utilising the resources of the normative tradition, implies that the Bible should be central. However, while it is clear that the Bible must be at the centre of any theological critique (normative criticism) of ordinary theology, does this also mean it must be central to the process of ordinary theological reflection itself? In other words, can ordinary theologians be critical and reflective without a significant and recognisable use of Scripture? The answer to this is yes, for two reasons. First, ordinary theologians being critically reflective is very different from their applying normative criticism using Scripture as a norm. It means applying criteria such as quizzing oneself about whether one's beliefs are coherent, not contradictory; consistent with one's other beliefs, well-grounded in evidence and argument. It could be argued that such rational criteria are also normative. Second, the role of the Bible in continuing revelation is not always primary. As I show below (see 'Continuing Revelation' page 26ff.), new 'natural knowledge' may be the key factor rather than (indeed often without) the application of biblical knowledge or expertise. The Bible ultimately has to be involved in the discernment of new revelation, but long-standing interpretation of particular passages may themselves be challenged and changed in this process.

I am persuaded both that 'ordinary theology' is a relevant and important concept, and that there are valid and workable criteria for deciding whether people are actually undertaking ordinary *theology*. This study is therefore properly described as an attempt to articulate the ordinary theology of LAD, the 'ordinary eschatology', of members of my congregation.

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches can be used to study ordinary theology, but 'the techniques of participant observation and unstructured or semi-structured interviewing that are so central to ethnographic research ... may best provide us with the necessary full description and understanding for the study of ordinary theology.'<sup>29</sup> But we also need conceptual work; any study of ordinary theology must deal with the normative claims of the Christian tradition. It should not remain at the descriptive level. Such a *theological* study of ordinary theology

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<sup>29</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 98.

cannot be confined to philosophical theology. As well as employing the tools and standards of rationality of the philosopher, therefore, it must also embrace the evaluation of theological beliefs from the standpoint, and using the resources, of the normative theological criteria derived from Christian Scripture, doctrine and ethics. What I am advocating here, therefore, is a *full* theological study *redirected* to the belief systems of the everyday believer.<sup>30</sup>

Description and analysis of the beliefs of ordinary theologians is not sufficient; we must critique as well as describe those beliefs, using the resources of the normative tradition. This approach is adopted within this project. However, as we shall see, the normative tradition is more problematic in relation to LAD than in many other areas of ordinary Christian believing.

### ***The Benefits of Ordinary Theology***

Astley claims both pragmatic and theological benefits for ordinary theology. The pragmatic benefits stem from the fact that in order for the church properly to exercise its various ministries, it should actually know something about those ministered to, especially what they think and believe. Ordinary theology can provide this. Furthermore, the actual process of doing so can itself be of great benefit to ordinary theologians. ‘Listening is a mark of respect; listening is a deeply pastoral, affirming act; listening tells people that they matter.’<sup>31</sup> We need to listen to what ordinary theologians are saying, both to respect and value them, and to better form a dialogue between the minister and those who are ministered to. This study confirms such benefits.

Richard Pratt recognises that the accusation of ‘theology by focus group’ can be levelled against a listening approach such as ordinary theology. How do we know they are not just expressing popular opinion rather than revealing the voice of God? Pratt’s response to this is to say that ordinary theology can at least allow new voices to be heard, and asks whether ordinary theology can actually be *leading* the faith community, with the academic and ecclesial authorities being left behind in some contemporary areas. For example, homosexuality and

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<sup>30</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 104.

<sup>31</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 147. Using the approach of Wittgenstein to language, Astley (*Ordinary Theology*, 114-22) also argues that the act of listening is vital to understand what is actually being said by an ordinary theologian. But their language must be seen in the context of the practice of faith. This suggests that a minister who knows his congregation well can be ideally placed to hear their ordinary theology, because, ‘just interviewing people will not reveal their theology in a way that we can understand, unless we can get them to talk about what this theology means in their practice, in their lives and in their culture.’ Furthermore, the very act of helping people to articulate their own beliefs encourages them critically to assess those beliefs. This is certainly my experience in this project.

contraception are areas where the teaching of the church is perceived as ‘wrong’ by many ordinary believers. ‘It is in the muddle and complexity of ordinary daily life that Christian ethics is really tested. It is in the experiences of ordinary daily life that we learn and relearn God – for each person and each generation has to recapitulate this learning.’<sup>32</sup> Pratt claims that the recent history of the Anglican Church with respect to the issues of women priests and bishops and same-sex relationships, and the Catholic Church with respect to contraception, are cases in point.

Such considerations lead us to the core theological benefits of ordinary theology. For Astley, ordinary theology represents an enormous untapped resource within the church, a ‘huge living experiment of people struggling to find and make meaning in their lives’, a ‘vast user-base’ which allows us to check the latest releases of ‘theological code’.<sup>33</sup> Ordinary theologians have to live their theology; it has to work for them. It is their footwear which is tested against the pathways and weather of real life. In other words, it is in the experience of ordinary theologians that theology is put to the test. Religious beliefs are actually held by believers, hence ‘they are the people who decide what *in fact* will count as falsifying evidence for their own beliefs’.<sup>34</sup>

But it is not just the practical ‘workability’ of theology which is tested in the lived experience of ordinary theologians; it is theology itself as the formal statement of church and tradition. In other words, in testing ‘if it works’ Astley suggests that this also means that – at least to a degree - we test whether it is right, whether it is true. The views of ordinary theologians can (should) affect the normative tradition itself, and the reason for saying so involves continuing revelation and the nature of biblical interpretation. ‘Christianity’s holy texts are always being re-read, re-assimilated, re-imagined and elaborated in the Christian tradition.’ For Astley, this practice should not be limited to academic theologians. ‘In particularising the gospel in its own life and culture, the congregation continually reinterprets the normative beliefs and practices of the church in a manner that provides important innovations for the church as a whole. ... *The*

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Pratt, ‘Ordinary Theology’, *Theology* 112, no. 866 (2009), 117.

<sup>33</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 148.

<sup>34</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 150.

*study of ordinary theology can make these innovations and elucidations available to theology in general*’ [emphasis added].<sup>35</sup>

These reflections may be related to the ongoing ‘Action Research: Church and Society’ (ARCS) project which has an interesting theological grounding. The value of Christian practice, in *theological* terms, is clear. ‘Our theological method is based on the assumption that the practices we are exploring ... are themselves already the bearers of theology; they express the contemporary living tradition of the Christian faith.’<sup>36</sup> The notion of a ‘living Christian tradition’ is crucial for ARCS. The authors point to the Second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum* 8) as an example of this idea, and claim that similar views can be seen within other ‘established theologies of tradition and revelation’.<sup>37</sup> The embodied (‘espoused’ and ‘operant’) theologies of Christians who practice their faith must be set in the context of the wider Christian tradition, hence the other two theological voices with which they are in conversation, the ‘formal’ and ‘normative’. The formal voice is that of academic theology and other relevant disciplines; the normative voice is that of scriptures, creeds, liturgies and official church teaching. ‘Conversation’ between these four voices is the way to achieve practical-theological insight. This is a hermeneutical approach in which the bottom-up theology of practitioners (articulated by grounded theory) is brought into conversation with a top-down application of pre-established theological criteria (the four themes of Christology, Grace, Church and World, and Sacraments and Sacramentality).<sup>38</sup> The operant and espoused theologies of practitioners are not only challenged by formal and normative theologies, *but they can also challenge and change* ‘from the theological wisdom of practice’ *the normative and formal* (which is how tradition actually develops). A central conviction of this model of ‘Theological Action Research’ (TAR) is that ‘the forms of theology articulated by practices have a crucial role in informing and forming both formal and, ultimately, normative theologies.’<sup>39</sup> Tradition is seen as ‘more than a discrete

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<sup>35</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 150-1.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Living Church in the Global City: Theology in Practice’ ARCS Research Report, November 2008 [http://www.rcc.ac.uk/downloads/pdf\\_files/ARCS%2520Report%25202008.pdf](http://www.rcc.ac.uk/downloads/pdf_files/ARCS%2520Report%25202008.pdf) (21 February 2011), 25.

<sup>37</sup> Helen Cameron *et al.*, *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 51-2.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Going Forth: An Enquiry into Evangelisation & Renewal in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales’, (Research Report by Von Hügel Institute, and Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge, November 2006) [http://www.rcc.ac.uk/downloads/pdf\\_files/Going%2520Forth%2520-%2520Research%2520Report.pdf](http://www.rcc.ac.uk/downloads/pdf_files/Going%2520Forth%2520-%2520Research%2520Report.pdf) (21 February 2011), 29.

<sup>39</sup> Cameron *et al.*, *Studying Local Churches*, 56.

body of knowledge or a history which we seek to bring into contact with contemporary practice'. It is also

the living embodiment of faith unfolding in and through these faith practices. There is a complex relationship of continuity and change here which requires discernment as to what can be regarded as truly authoritative tradition. What characterises contemporary, or living, tradition is that it has yet to be discerned by the Church as a whole. It is tradition in tentative, growing mode, whose authority, whilst real, is different from that of the already discerned (and continually re-discerned) tradition of Christian history.<sup>40</sup>

Translating this into Astley's terms, ordinary theology expresses the living tradition of the church, which is a key indicator in how far the normative tradition can and should change. Furthermore, the key driver in this is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to note that in the ARCS project the theme of 'grace' which the project expected to find is not clearly present, but pneumatological questions have come to the fore. A key question for ARCS is the extent to which empirical data could indicate a valid (Spirit-led) challenge to existing normative theology.

Astley argues that ordinary theology 'can furnish us with a wider understanding of doctrinal norms, by providing a wider concept of what the church believes as a norm for doctrine.' He sees doctrine as those aspects of theology which have won acceptance, which have become the norm; but this raises the question, for whom has it become the norm? He points out that all doctrinal norms are themselves, in origin, the beliefs of others (Apostles, Fathers, Councils). 'In other words they originate in the Christian tradition. They are themselves beliefs, accepted as "normal".'<sup>41</sup> The problem is that at different times in church history the 'community' has been variously defined and limited; and 'the influential have had most influence and the winners have written the rule book'.<sup>42</sup> *Who, and how many, need to accept a belief in order for it to become orthodox?* Astley suggests that ordinary theology can help us regain the traditional idea of the 'consensus of the faithful' (the *consensus fidelium*, reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council - *Lumen Gentium* 12). He argues that 'surely a strain, if not a paradox, is created when theology identifies as "Christian doctrine" or a "doctrine of the church" beliefs that many ordinary Christians do

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<sup>40</sup> ARCS Research Report, 'Living Church in the Global City', 41.

<sup>41</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 154.

<sup>42</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 156.

not share.’<sup>43</sup> It is clear from various empirical studies that many churchgoers and church members are quite unorthodox (see Appendix A), but what does this really mean for normative theology?

Astley praises Johannes van der Ven<sup>44</sup> for being willing to say that the *consensus fidelium* can and should be mapped from empirical data and that such data is necessary to highlight discrepancies between ordinary faith and the teachings of the church. However, while empirical facts about what Christians believe need to be taken account of, ‘they are not necessarily to be read as definitive for Christian belief.’ It is not as simple as that. At least, however, ‘we may argue that there is something unstable in any account of Christian doctrine that ignores substantial minority views (and in some areas majority views) within the laity’.<sup>45</sup>

It is possible, of course, to argue orthodoxy on the grounds of appeal to Scripture or tradition alone, but the voice of ordinary Christians (the consensus of the faithful) surely has a key role. The argument I present below is that this is particularly so with regard to continuing revelation, where ordinary theologians have a crucial role to play. Astley claims that

even academic and official ecclesiastical theology are driven by changes that go on in mass society among the great unwashed. ... Our values, assumptions, beliefs and ways of thinking change very markedly over time, and our churches and theologies ... must eventually catch up with many of these changes. In Christianity it is the lay people, the ordinary theologians, who often change first – despite the clergy’s continual grumbling about their conservative nature.<sup>46</sup>

I agree with this viewpoint, and would suggest that this is actually how it has always been; the Scriptures themselves being formed originally by such a process, and the normative tradition being always tested and re-formed by the community of faith. Astley is surely right that ordinary believers are most open to the influences of a changing world, because they live in it and reflect their faith in it, and are therefore the best placed theologians to judge and respond to such changes. Ordinary theology ‘*is the church’s front line*. ... And whatever we make of it theologically, speaking statistically ordinary theology *is* the theology of

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<sup>43</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Johannes van der Ven, *Practical Theology: an Empirical Approach*, trans. Barbara Schultz (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993).

<sup>45</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 159.

<sup>46</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 160.



God's church.'<sup>47</sup> I wish to focus on a specific way in which ordinary theology may be of benefit to the church at large.

### 1.3 ORDINARY THEOLOGIANS AS 'SIGNAL PROCESSORS' OF THE SPIRIT

I wish to extend Astley's arguments in order to suggest that a key role that ordinary theologians can play is in acting as *signal processors of the Spirit*. In other words, ordinary theology can be an important mechanism for discerning the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit for the Christian community. Indeed, this could be seen as *the central claim to importance of ordinary theology*. Ordinary theologians are those best placed to notice when theology goes astray at a fundamental level, because they are the community of practice and belief where theology is accepted or rejected, tested and judged. This view is supported by a detailed consideration of *continuing revelation* (see below).

This metaphor of signal processor is taken from the device used in electrical engineering for the extraction of information from complex signals in the presence of noise. Ordinary theologians, I would argue, act as aërials, or receivers, for the Spirit: as people seeking to put into practice their Christian faith. They are ideally placed to undertake this function. However, this is not sufficient. It implies that the Spirit-signal is clear and simple, requiring only its reception by someone. This is rarely if ever the case, for individual believers or church communities. God communicates with us in and through our complex, and often confusing, human condition and context. What we believe we understand as the prompting of the Spirit requires a degree of filtering and clarification. There is a great deal of theological noise in the 'Spirit-ether', where complexity can sometimes be turned into clarity by appropriate signal processing.

Of course, as a Congregationalist, this claim is somewhat easier to make than may be the case within other Christian denominations. The independence of local congregations is foundational to our understanding of how the Spirit operates. The church meeting is key.

All members of a Congregational Church are allowed to attend the church meeting and take part in discussions and decisions. This is the governing body of the Church, which meets usually monthly under the guidance and

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<sup>47</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 162.

power of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the privileges and responsibilities of membership! It is here that the members should seek the mind of Christ, through His promise 'That where two or three are gathered together in His name He is present!'<sup>48</sup>

As a Congregationalist, my basic assumption is that the community of believers is the place where God's guidance is sought and the promptings of the Spirit discerned. This should be done in a worshipful context.

The aim of the Church Meeting is to discover the will of God for the future of the church: for this reason it is important that the business is conducted in an atmosphere of prayer. In taking decisions it is far better to seek the consensus of the meeting: in establishing the common mind of the meeting, one can best see the will of God for his people. Should a vote be necessary, a close division is a sure indication that the church is not yet of a common mind on that issue. In such circumstances a decision should usually be deferred.<sup>49</sup>

However, I am fully aware from long experience that even this apparently simple mechanism for discernment of the Spirit is by no means straightforward or foolproof. I am also aware that in other denominations the equivalent mechanism can be a far more complicated process. Furthermore, claims to spiritual discernment can be closely associated with power and authority within any church (or sect) structure. David Martin, in a sociological analysis, argues that 'from the point of view of ecclesiastical authority, "the Spirit" is an all-purpose legitimator'.<sup>50</sup> Douglas Davies suggests that the post-industrial cultural context is important in recent charismatic resurgence: the preferred doctrine of God is where the Holy Spirit features most prominently. 'With the rise of models of man focused upon the self and its sensitivity in interpersonal relations there emerged the possibility of conceiving of the Spirit as a highly personal force dealing intimately with each individual believer.' Pentecost becomes more powerful than Good Friday in terms of personal salvation.<sup>51</sup> The recent Pentecostal movement raises many interesting issues.<sup>52</sup> However, detailed analysis of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this thesis. I want only to indicate the basis upon which I

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<sup>48</sup> 'Congregational Way' <http://www.congregational.org.uk/content.aspx?id=3758> (30 June 2011)

<sup>49</sup> Richard Cleaves and Michael Durber, with Angela Robinson and John Bourne, *Patterns for Worship* (Nottingham: The Congregational Federation, 1992), 331.

<sup>50</sup> David Martin, 'The Political Economy of the Holy Ghost', in David Martin and Peter Mullen (eds.), *Strange Gifts? A Guide to Charismatic Renewal* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 60.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas Davies, 'The Charismatic Ethic and the Spirit of Post Industrialism', in Martin and Mullen (eds.), *Strange Gifts?*, 145-6.

<sup>52</sup> For an interesting analysis of this, especially after his *The Secular City*, see Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: the Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

believe that ordinary theologians can be signal processors of the Spirit, particularly with regard to doctrine.

Alister McGrath claims that ‘doctrine’ and theology are very different: the former ‘implies reference to a tradition and a community’, while the latter ‘more properly designates the views of individuals, not necessarily within the community or tradition, who seek to explore ideas without any necessary commitment to them’. So, ‘one could suggest that doctrine is essentially the prevailing expression of faith of the Christian community with reference to the content of the Christian revelation’. McGrath then argues that ‘the community is not committed to the ideas of the theologians: such commitment would restrict their freedom to speculate, to explore, to criticise.’ The community can accept or reject the views of theologians. Furthermore, doctrinal development is *not* due entirely to the speculation of theologians; for instance, McGrath believes that the doctrine of original sin came from the sacramental life of the Christian community, and the assumption of Mary from popular piety.<sup>53</sup>

‘Doctrine entails a sense of commitment to a community, and a sense of obligation to speak on its behalf, where the corporate mind of the community exercises a restraint over the individual’s perception of truth. Doctrine is an activity, a process of transmission of the collective wisdom of a community, rather than a passive set of deliverances. The views of theologians are doctrinally significant, in so far as they have won acceptance within the community. The concept of ‘reception’ is of central importance to the concept of doctrine, in that a community is involved in the assessment of whether a decision, judgement or theological opinion is consonant with their corporate understanding of the Christian faith, as perceived within that community. Doctrine may thus be provisionally defined as communally authoritative teachings regarded as essential to the identity of the Christian community.’<sup>54</sup>

I wish to supplement McGrath’s position by saying that the judgement of the community relies upon the correct discernment of the promptings of the Holy Spirit. In a remarkable essay written in 1859, Cardinal Newman argues for just such a key role for the ordinary faithful. The reason for this is clear: ‘because the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and because their *consensus* through Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church’. Newman lays great stress on the *consensus fidelium*: the consensus of the faithful can be relied upon by the Pope as the judgement of the

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<sup>53</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 10-11.

<sup>54</sup> McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, 11-12.

infallible church. This does not mean ‘that infallibility is in the “consensus fidelium,” but that that “consensus” is an *indicium* or *instrumentum* to us of the judgement of that Church which is infallible’. One of the ways the consensus of the faithful has been regarded by theologians of the church is ‘as a direction of the Holy Ghost’. Newman then gives historical instances of where this consensus has been influential, including the Arian controversy of the fourth century. He argues that the Nicene dogma was maintained not by bishops, councils or Pope, but by the ordinary people of the church.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Continuing Revelation***

Ted Peters observes that with respect to difficult-to-believe concepts such as LAD ‘we have been victimized by divine revelation. Heaven has visited earth.’<sup>56</sup> A key issue for this research project is whether such victimisation continues? If so, where and how does it happen, and how can we be sure it is revelation? Can such revelation be discerned by ordinary theologians; can they be the signal processors of the church for recognising Spirit-led revelation?

David Brown’s five volume series<sup>57</sup> concerning revelation and experience provides a compelling view of continuing revelation and the value of a dynamic tradition informed by changing human experience. I believe it also provides an explanation of why the views of ordinary theologians have been and continue to be of great significance. Brown shows that tradition is not secondary to revelation, but is actually ‘the motor that sustains revelation both within Scripture and beyond.’ In fact, this is so clear that it requires Christians to ‘disabuse themselves of the habit of contrasting biblical revelation and later tradition, and instead see the hand of God in a continuing process that encompasses both.’ Brown further

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<sup>55</sup> John Henry Newman, ‘On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine’, *The Rambler*, July 1859, reproduced in John Henry Newman, *Conscience, Concensus and the Development of Doctrine: Revolutionary Texts by John Henry Cardinal Newman*, ed. James Gaffney, (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1992), 392-428. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/newman-faithful.html> (30 June 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Ted Peters, ‘Resurrection: The Conceptual Challenge’, in Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, and Michael Welker (eds.), *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 297.

<sup>57</sup> Produced over a ten year period, the five volumes, all published by Oxford University Press: *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (1999), *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (2000), *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (2004), *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (2007), and *God and Mystery in Words: Experience Through Metaphor and Drama* (2008). The first two volumes are most directly relevant, but the other three make important points concerning sources of extra-biblical experience which can inform continuing revelation.

argues that the incarnation itself ‘reveals a God who took with maximum seriousness the limitations of a specific cultural context.’ We need to see how the story develops, how God has continued to be involved in the history of the community of faith.<sup>58</sup> Tradition has been ‘the imaginative motor that has ensured the continuous adaptation of God’s revelation to the world under new circumstances and conditions.’ This has been a messy process because it involved people, and hence ‘a fallible Bible and a fallible Church interacting with a no less fallible world.’<sup>59</sup> Brown argues that God interacts with his people throughout history in a way which takes seriously their human context. Within Christianity the primary focus of reflection on that interaction must be the Bible, because at root Christianity rests on the specific historical claim of the incarnation. But the text is not unchanging, rather it ‘becomes part of a living tradition that is constantly subject to change, and that includes change in the perceived content of the biblical narratives: new insights are generated as different social conditions open up new possibilities and perspectives.’<sup>60</sup>

Brown also demonstrates how the visual and literary imagination can be an important part of this process. He is clear that in trying to tell the revelatory story, we need to recognise God at work everywhere in his world, helping us to shape our comprehension of his purposes. ‘The natural world, the layout of a town or garden, the structure of a specific building, a basketball shot can all induce religious feelings that ought not to be summarily dismissed as though necessarily inferior to a Christian’s experience of response to prayer or of worship in a church.’<sup>61</sup> The objection that this could simply be a matter of human construction should be countered by the claim that this may be no less true of experiences in worship. Some may also object that everything must, finally, be measured against Scripture, otherwise chaos may result. Brown rejects this view at length in his first two volumes: the biblical deposit of revelation has remained the same only superficially.

In practice it has been in constant process of change, as new contexts have thrown up fresh challenges that demanded that the text be read in new ways. This emphatically does not mean that the Church’s understanding of revelation is simply reactive and culturally determined (the text has the

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<sup>58</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 405.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 107-8.

<sup>61</sup> Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, 407-8.

power to critique, as well as respond to, context), but it does entail that it does not exist as a self-contained unit.

For example, it surely cannot be the case that the modern Christian view of the equality of the sexes has come from the biblical text itself. Of course, this means that criteria for judgement are contentious; but external (to Scripture) influences cannot be denied. 'God has been addressing humanity at large throughout human history both in its experience of the natural world and in the various ways in which it has expanded upon that experience in its own creativity.' The 'scandal of particularity' is usually misunderstood, because if we recognise that for God to be incarnate at all he had to be so at a particular time and place. The scandal is simply to ignore all the other contexts in which God addresses us.<sup>62</sup> Jon Levenson points out that the very fact of a canon

challenges the most basic presupposition of historical criticism, that a book must be understood only within the context in which it was produced. The very existence of a canon testifies to the reality of *recontextualisation*; an artefact may survive the circumstances that brought it into being. ... For were the meaning of the text *only* a function of the particular historical circumstances of its composition, recontextualisation would never have occurred, and no Bible would have come into existence.<sup>63</sup>

But this does not mean, of course, that God is at work equally everywhere. At the end of his first two volumes, Brown specifies the criteria which he has been applying in determining revelatory truth.<sup>64</sup> Usually more than one is applied at the same time, but no hierarchy or essential combinations are proposed. For the purposes of this project, his *empirical* and *conceptual* criteria are most relevant. Brown argues that we no longer believe in any real difference between the sexes because of empirical discoveries that have actually demonstrated women to be no less effective in leadership, education, and so forth. The fundamental New Testament principle of equality of regard could then be invoked to require equality of status, but with no pretence that this view was always hidden in the scriptural text. Homosexuality is now undergoing a similar process. This, I suggest, translates directly into the context of ordinary theology. Some empirical data may best be perceived by ordinary theologians: for example, whether certain doctrinal expressions remain meaningful for people. Brown demonstrates that

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<sup>62</sup> Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, 409-10.

<sup>63</sup> J.D. Levenson, 'Historical Criticism and the Fate of the Enlightenment Project', in his *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press: 1993), 123.

<sup>64</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 389-406.

new information from human experience, what he calls new ‘natural knowledge’, can influence how existing doctrine is perceived, or can facilitate new revelation.

By his *conceptual* criteria Brown means questions of coherence and intelligibility, such as, does continuing personal identity after death require a physical body? He argues that the dominant New Testament picture of our resurrection having to wait to the end of all things, with no one except Christ now fully alive and conscious in heaven, is wrong because it does not make sense in relation to what we know about social human being. So the doctrine of Christ's exaltation and ascension makes no sense unless we also accept that heaven is not empty. ‘The tendency of much modern theology to return to the primary biblical image is thus, so far from being illuminating, actually a perversion of what it is to be human: Christ’s human nature living in complete isolation from all others.’ Brown therefore suggests that ‘the Church should follow the minority New Testament witness, and envisage a community of saints already with Christ in heaven.’<sup>65</sup> He also argues (like Cullmann) that we cannot degrade Christ’s conquest of death by saying that his victory actually does nothing for us until a final resurrection. In the context of the ordinary theology of this project, the application of this conceptual criterion can be seen clearly in the argument that experience of a loving God is simply incompatible with judgement and hell (see below page 87 ‘Judgement or Not?’).

Brown’s *ecclesial criteria* is also worthy of attention.

The vagaries of church history both within the canon and beyond convince me that no official pronouncements of the Church, however conceived, can of themselves be said to carry an automatic seal of truth, any more than does Scripture itself. Even the universal belief of centuries may fail.

The recent and rapid demise of Hell as a place of eternal punishment is an example of this. Brown believes that, ‘the presumption must always be that truth is to be found somewhere within Christ's Church, for the Spirit is ever searching to correct the Church’s inadequacies’.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the history of the church shows that ‘heresy is indispensable to the growth of orthodoxy’, and although unity is a good goal, we should never suppose any issue to be completely resolved and closed. ‘That might seem to make all religious truth provisional, and in one

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<sup>65</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 395-6. The full argument is in chapter 3 of this volume.

<sup>66</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 404.

sense it clearly does, but no more so, I think, than what happens with scientific or historical truth.’<sup>67</sup>

In concluding his final volume, Brown accepts that while his general list of criteria is helpful, there are no simple answers. Every instance will be unique,

So the best way of proceeding is to examine each contested case in some detail. If one believes in divine providence at all, the fact that the community of faith in general has changed its mind creates at least a basic presupposition of a move in the right direction. But it offers no absolute guarantee. [In] such conflicts, it may take centuries before a proper balance is achieved.<sup>68</sup>

A degree of imaginative engagement should always be one of the relevant criteria because ‘what I am above all concerned to ensure is that Christianity be seen as a religion to be practised and not just a doctrinal system that may or may not be internally coherent.’<sup>69</sup>

Brown argues against any ‘discovery’ view that says all revelation has already been ‘captured’ within the canon, and that what we do subsequently is simply to discover what is already hidden there. Such a view confuses the closure of the canon with the closure of revelation, and draws too clear a distinction between revelation and tradition. Biblical scholarship values the historical far more than did the New Testament writers. ‘For what we repeatedly discover is the subordination of historical accuracy to something deemed much more important, some interpretation of how the story of Moses or Jesus was supposed to apply in new circumstances, in the life of the author’s contemporaries.’<sup>70</sup> This was the norm for that time and culture, especially when the intention of these documents was clearly evangelical. Brown also points out that if we say (correctly) that truth claims are intelligible only against the backdrop of existing cultural assumptions, we must be careful not to misunderstand the implication of this. It is not that history is unimportant, but rather that there is an indifference to historical detail. ‘So, whether we consider the original revelatory event or the original revelatory text, it is just not the case that their meaning was seen as fixed in stone. Rather, both were treated as a medium towards further disclosures.’<sup>71</sup> The same thing

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<sup>67</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 273-4.

<sup>69</sup> Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 277.

<sup>70</sup> David Brown, ‘Did Revelation Cease?’ in Alan G. Padgett (ed.), *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 124.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, ‘Did Revelation Cease?’, 128.



happened with post-biblical exegesis, except that when the canon was closed it was no longer felt appropriate to alter previous versions of the text.<sup>72</sup>

Brown believes that the key factor needed to understand such development is ‘creative insight’ that enables the original events or words to be read in a new way. It is here where we can see how the divine revealer can still be at work. The important causative factor is a ‘change in our natural knowledge’; for example, an awareness of the cultural conditioning of male-female relationships, which allows us to read a text with creative insight and facilitate further revelation. So Brown proposes that

God at each stage of the development of the canon and beyond has been interacting with the recipients of his revelation, and how they read it is a function not just of the divine will or of historical circumstances but of what God can get the individual to see on the basis of his reflection both upon his context and upon the biblical text. In other words, there is an inspired imposition of meaning rather than its discovery, and so the crucial dependence is not upon a meaning already inherent in the text but upon a datable individual(s) being inspired to propose that meaning.

God accommodates himself to the historical circumstances of the individuals concerned and advances their perceptions through whatever means are available, even misunderstandings of the text or implausible exegesis. The sharp contrast between revelation and tradition is no longer tenable. The biblical text has become fixed, but not how it is interpreted; and even within the biblical text itself there is a history of interpretation and reinterpretation. The interaction between a community of faith and God has continued to yield fresh reinterpretations.<sup>73</sup>

Brown provides a compelling example. He accepts that the dominant image in the New Testament is final resurrection, but asks what if the conditioning factors (cultural, historical) which produced this dominant view no longer apply? Could we be justified in demoting or correcting the dominant biblical perspective? Brown argues, ‘God would then still have revealed our ultimate destiny to be with him, but the details of how this is to be conceived awaited further adjustments and corrections in the process of his continuing dialogue with his Church.’ The specific cultural factor Brown has in mind is belief in an imminent end of the world, which ‘would inevitably preclude much interest in the interim state of the dead, since all believers would soon be reunited anyway.’ So it is hardly surprising that Paul left us very little detail of the state of the dead, who

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 121ff.

<sup>73</sup> Brown, ‘Did Revelation Cease?’, 140-1.

would only be in that state for a very short time. Brown argues that what God was revealing was his desire to share his life eternally with us, which was originally perceived through the (distorting) lens of the imminent parousia. We now know this expectation to be mistaken, so the expression of this original revelation requires a new form.<sup>74</sup>

This example is directly relevant to my argument (see below page 224) that changing conceptions of the physical cosmos must affect how we interpret Paul's view of LAD. It also links to the Lindbeck view of doctrine discussed below, which suggests an underlying revelatory consistency leading to differing doctrinal expressions over time. Brown is absolutely clear that understanding biblical revelation is critically dependent on developments in the wider culture, and so recommends a 'listening process'. This happens to some extent anyway, even if the church doesn't recognise it, for example with regard to equality of the sexes. However, Brown wants 'the entire process more explicitly acknowledged by my fellow Christians.'<sup>75</sup> Part of this required listening must surely be to hear the voices of ordinary theologians.

Ordinary theologians, then, can have a vital role to play in the community of faith discerning continuing revelation. Brown shows us that God communicates through all elements of human experience and that new 'natural knowledge' (that is, new insights into the human condition from cultural, scientific, sociological, and artistic development, often via 'imaginative' insight) can enable us to receive new revelation from a reinterpretation of biblical texts. Not everything from contemporary culture is capable of doing this, of course, and any claim to a revelation of God's purpose or truth must finally be brought to Scripture: not to see if it is already hidden there, or that it agrees with what we already understand from Scripture, but rather that it is not contrary to agreed general scriptural principles. If God is the *continuing* creator of the world, then the actions and purposes of God may be seen in our ongoing experience of that creation. We must therefore listen to what ordinary theologians are telling us. Current interpretation of Scripture can and should be, and as Brown suggests probably always has been, challenged by ordinary theology: that is, by the views of ordinary believers who are acting as the Spirit signal processors of the church.

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<sup>74</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 108-10.

<sup>75</sup> Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 274.

### *Doctrine Tested in the Ordinary*

If a doctrine of the church (or indeed a position of academic theology which claims to be normative) says one thing, but ordinary theologians say something quite different, then there is reason to re-examine the former. This study finds just such a dislocation with respect to Christian views of LAD. I am not claiming any simple relationship between the views of ordinary theologians and any new doctrinal claim; one cannot just ‘read off’ from ordinary theology a new doctrine or correction to existing doctrine. To push the analogy to near breaking point: the ‘signal processing’ may be incomplete or distorted by too much interference, or the signal may simply be too complex to process. However, if the expected signal cannot be processed with the expected degree of clarity, then that in itself is worthy of attention.

The ‘rule’ concept of doctrine from George Lindbeck (and others) provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between normative doctrine/theology and ordinary theologians. The argument of Lindbeck for a cultural-linguistic alternative understanding of religion is well known.<sup>76</sup> He views religions as ‘comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualised, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world.’ Religions can be viewed ‘as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.’ To become a Christian is to know the ‘story’ well enough so as to be able to interpret one’s experience by it. However, although the story is important, this is not to say that belief in propositions is vital; hence Lindbeck’s criticism of the ‘propositionalist’ or ‘cognitivist’ theory of religions.<sup>77</sup> ‘A comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but is rather the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one’s life.’ Religion is thus not about choosing to believe certain propositions; but rather to become religious is ‘to interiorise a

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<sup>76</sup> It is interesting to note that Lindbeck was very surprised by the reaction to his book, which he saw as a preliminary work dealing mainly with ecumenism. He thought there was actually little new in his book, other than the ecumenism, but ended up being attacked by both liberals and conservatives for his views on doctrine. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley (London: SCM, 2002), 196-200.

<sup>77</sup> McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, 71, argues that Lindbeck’s antithetical view of ‘cognitive’ and ‘experiential’ models of doctrine is incorrect. ‘The cognitive dimension of Christian doctrine is the framework upon which Christian experience is supported, the channel through which it is conveyed. It is a skeleton which gives strength and shape to the flesh of experience.’

set of skills by practice and training. ... The primary knowledge is not *about* the religion, nor *that* the religion teaches such and such, but rather *how* to be religious in such and such ways.' This interiorised skill, according to Lindbeck, manifests itself in an ability to make intuitive judgements about authenticity within the religion, which is quite unlike the reflective and theological knowledge of the trained theologian.<sup>78</sup>

For Lindbeck, personal experience is derivative, so

religious change or innovation must be understood, not as proceeding from new experiences, but as resulting from the interactions of a cultural-linguistic system with changing situations. Religious traditions are not transformed, abandoned, or replaced because of an upwelling of new or different ways of feeling about the self, world, or God, but because a religious interpretive scheme (embodied, as it always is, in religious practice and belief) develops anomalies in its application in new contexts.

This is very similar to Brown's idea of the role of new natural knowledge in continuing revelation. Lindbeck believes 'prophetic figures' re-configure the inherited patterns and discover the new concepts that remove the anomalies. 'Religious experiences, in the sense of feelings, sentiments, or emotions, then result from the new conceptual patterns instead of being their source.'<sup>79</sup>

Lindbeck proposes a regulative or 'rule' theory of doctrine, in which doctrines are seen as 'communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action', rather than as 'expressive symbols or truth claims'.<sup>80</sup> Propositional truths do not reside in doctrine, because doctrines are actually the grammatical rules of the language of the religion. 'Just as grammar by itself affirms nothing either true or false regarding the world in which language is used, but only about language, so theology and doctrine, to the extent that they are second-order activities, assert nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions.' Such assertions can only be made when speaking religiously, that is, when practising religion. So, 'propositional truth and falsity characterise ordinary religious language when it is used to mould lives through prayer, praise, preaching, and exhortation.'<sup>81</sup> Lindbeck recognises that this means that these 'rules' can remain as the unchanging core of the doctrine, while the propositions which follow from them can and do change in different historical and

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<sup>78</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984), 32-6.

<sup>79</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 39.

<sup>80</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 69.

cultural situations. For example with Trinitarian doctrine, Lindbeck claims that it is not the creeds themselves which are doctrinal, but rather the three ‘regulative principles’ which he detects as underlying the emergence of the various propositional statements about the Trinity.<sup>82</sup> Nicaea and Chalcedon were about setting limits on how we could speak about Jesus and God, not about unchanging first-order propositions. These creeds ‘were among the few, and perhaps the only, possible outcomes of the process of adjusting Christian discourse to the world of late classical antiquity in a manner conformable to regulative principles that were already at work in the earliest strata of the tradition.’<sup>83</sup>

Lindbeck is not alone in seeing doctrine this way. Gerard Loughlin claims that doctrine ‘resists closure’, it is both complete and yet never complete; it is always possible to supplement what has already been said. The *story* of Jesus Christ (his person) ‘is the non-doctrinal basis upon which doctrine rests’. Knowledge of this person and story comes only through practice, and doctrine ‘is simply the rule and discipline of the practice. ... We can thus think of doctrine as the grammar of Christian discourse; the stage directions for the church’s performance of the gospel.’ Loughlin stresses, therefore, that ‘doctrine is always secondary to that which it informs – the church’s performance of the gospel – which alone is its basis or foundation. ... There is thus no legitimation of doctrine, in history or experience, outside of Christian practice itself.’<sup>84</sup>

Lindbeck wants to make it clear that we cannot just abandon all truth and certainty to the winds of historical change; but neither can we just repeat what was said in the past. The key question is, how do we know which changed form of doctrinal expression is faithful to the religious roots? ‘Those who are best able to judge in these matters ... are those who have effectively interiorised a religion.’<sup>85</sup> He points out that applying a rule theory of doctrine gives infallibility a partly empirical meaning. ‘It suggests explanations ... for how the Holy Spirit operates in preserving the church from error.’ The most nearly infallible ‘is what the theological tradition calls the *consensus fidelium* or *consensus ecclesiae*.’ Just

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<sup>82</sup> The first is a monotheistic principle; the second is the principle of historic specificity (Jesus was actually born, lived and died in real human history); and the third is ‘Christological maximalism’ (every possible importance attached to Jesus which does not contradict the other two principles). Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 94.

<sup>83</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 95.

<sup>84</sup> Gerard Loughlin, ‘The Basis and Authority of Doctrine’ in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52-8.

<sup>85</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 79.

as a linguist would test grammar by seeing if it makes sense to competent speakers of the language, ‘so the student of religion submits the consequences of doctrinal formulations to the judgement of competent practitioners of that religion.’<sup>86</sup> But who are the competent practitioners and how do we recognise them? Are they the mass of ordinary theologians?

Here, Lindbeck takes a more robust view than Astley; Christian membership does not guarantee religious competence. Indeed, ‘most Christians through most of Christian history have spoken their own official tongue very poorly’. Such lack of competence means ‘they cannot, from the cultural-linguistic perspective, be part of that *consensus fidelium* against which doctrinal proposals are tested’. Religious competence ‘is the empirical equivalent of insisting on the Spirit as one of the tests of doctrine’. The competent must be mainstream and orthodox, and even without formal theological training, ‘are likely to be saturated with the language of Scripture and/or liturgy’. They are ‘flexibly devout’, for, ‘they have so interiorised the grammar of their religion that they are reliable judges, not directly of the doctrinal formulations (for these may be too technical for them to understand), but of the acceptability or unacceptability of the consequences of these formulations in ordinary religious life and language’. The agreement of such people, Lindbeck suggests, can be described as infallible. A very high level of certitude is possible with regard to religious doctrines because, given a cultural-linguistic approach, they ‘are matters of empirical knowledge’ (although this means they are ‘Christian’ rather than that they are ontologically true).<sup>87</sup>

However, in the context of later work concerning reform of clerical training, Lindbeck seems to soften this view somewhat. He identifies a kind of ‘passive [theological] competence in which the saintly excel’, which does not need theological expertise. Such spiritually mature people ‘may have only the most meagre ability to articulate and describe their patterns of belief and practice, but they can recognise misdescriptions. They may have no talent in assessing differences between the second-order accounts which theologians formulate, but they can sense ... when the usages authorised by these accounts violate the deep

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<sup>86</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 99.

<sup>87</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 100-1.

grammar of the faith.’<sup>88</sup> The potential importance and ordinariness of ordinary theologians is thus recognised by Lindbeck, albeit in a more restricted way than Astley suggests.<sup>89</sup>

Lindbeck defines doctrine as ‘communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question. They may be formally stated or informally operative, but in any case they indicate what constitutes faithful adherence to a community.’ Operative doctrines are essential for any religious body; Lindbeck believes there is no such thing as completely ‘creedless Christianity’. However, official doctrines can cease to be operational, and doctrines can remain operational without ever becoming official. This can be because they just seem self-evident (‘God is love’), or that they are implicit but unrecognised (opposition to slavery). The usual way in which implicit doctrine becomes explicit is by controversy. Dispute about what can or cannot be said forces the community to make up its collective mind. This means that most doctrines are understood in terms of what they oppose. It is also possible that official doctrines do not reflect the most important beliefs (which are simply assumed and have never been challenged).<sup>90</sup>

Lindbeck also claims that a rule view of doctrine can accommodate beliefs as conditional and temporary. For example, with regard to the doctrine of immortality of the soul: ‘It could be argued that this belief is necessary to the integrity of Christian faith only when believers think in terms of classical mind-body dualism, but not when their anthropology is Hebraic or modern.’<sup>91</sup> Theological evaluation of doctrine is not about ontology (what is actually the case) but rather about ‘how well it organises the data of Scripture and tradition with a view to their use in Christian worship and life.’ Ontological questions are ‘unanswerable this side of the Eschaton’.<sup>92</sup> A propositional approach to doctrine is about interpreting a truth, but the regulative approach is about obeying a rule.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> George Lindbeck, ‘Spiritual Formation and Theological Education’, in Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis, and Colin Crowder (eds.), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader in Theology and Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 288.

<sup>89</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 153-4.

<sup>90</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 74-5.

<sup>91</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 86.

<sup>92</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 106.

<sup>93</sup> A major potential weakness of Lindbeck’s postliberal approach is that doctrine is merely regulative rules for talking about God, which are neither true nor false, nor necessarily connected to the reality of God. So Gregory C. Higgins (‘The Significance of Postliberalism for Religious Education’, in Astley, Francis and Crowder (eds.), *Theological Perspectives*, 135-145) argues that some form of apologetics is

Thus, with the doctrine of an immortal soul, if this is a first-order proposition then those who believe it to be a doctrine have to try to find a way to reinterpret this truth in the light of objections to mind-body dualism; but they can do so only by forcing a reinterpretation which was far from the world view of the original formulators. ‘They are virtually forced into that endless process of speculative reinterpretation which is the main stock-in-trade of much contemporary theology.’ However, if the doctrine is seen as a rule, ‘attention is focused on the concrete life and language of the community. Because the doctrine is to be followed rather than interpreted, the theologian’s task is to specify the circumstances, whether temporary or enduring, in which it applies. ... the gears mesh with reality and theological reflection on doctrine becomes directly relevant to the praxis of the church.’<sup>94</sup> Lindbeck emphasises that the ultimate test of any new theological method is in its practice. If a new approach proves in actual employment ‘to be conceptually powerful and practically useful to relevant communities, it will in time become standard’. This was how the theological outlooks of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Schleiermacher became established. ‘There is no way of testing the merits and demerits of a theological method apart from performance.’<sup>95</sup>

In his attempt to reduce the theological importance of experience, Lindbeck places great stress on the ‘prophet’ figures and therefore seems to downgrade the importance of the general mass of ordinary theologians. However, an important role for ordinary theologians can still be recognised in making the anomaly (in the religious interpretive scheme) visible in the first place, so that the ‘prophets’ can then do something with it. But Lindbeck is concerned to ensure that adequate theological and spiritual discipline and expertise is maintained by those responsible for the grammar of faith, a view which ultimately conflicts with Astley’s view of ordinary theologians. Nonetheless, Lindbeck’s concept of underlying ‘regulative principles’ of doctrine is still highly relevant to ordinary

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still required for learning about the Christian faith. See also Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 117. McGrath (*The Genesis of Doctrine*, 26-34) asks of Lindbeck how did the regulatory language of Christianity come into being, and to what does it refer? McGrath is correct in saying that at points Lindbeck ‘seems to suggest that conceiving theology as the grammar of the Christian language entails the abandonment of any talk about God as an independent reality and any suggestion that it is possible to make truth claims (in an ontological, rather than intrasystemic, sense) concerning him’. McGrath argues that the origin (evolution over time) of the Christian language must be open to historical analysis: it cannot simply be taken as ‘given’. The complexity of doctrine as an historical phenomenon needs more fully to be appreciated.

<sup>94</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 107.

<sup>95</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 134.



theology, and I suggest the following aspects are particularly relevant to this study:

- a) With regard to LAD, *we can expect that the outward propositional (doctrinal) expressions of this will change significantly over time*, but that certain underlying regulative principles may nevertheless remain constant. In other words, the fact that expressions about heaven may change significantly over time does not mean that there is no ‘substance’ to the Christian afterlife.
- b) It is in the *practice* of faith that the articulation of underlying regulative principles of doctrine, as propositional statements, is tested. Ordinary theology is the expression by ordinary theologians of their practice of faith. The views of ordinary theologians are well placed to indicate when current propositional doctrinal or academic expressions of LAD are at odds with the underlying regulative principles.<sup>96</sup> In other words, ordinary theology may challenge current expressions of LAD doctrine.
- c) Recognising that doctrine can remain constant ‘underneath’, while changing quite markedly in its outward expression, suggests there is *no final definitive form of biblical interpretation*. This is an important issue for ordinary eschatology, because the current ‘norm’ rests on specific interpretations of key texts.

## 1.4 ASSESSING THE THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION OF ORDINARY THEOLOGIANS

Having provided a defence of why and how the views of ordinary theologians can be critically important for the normative tradition of the church, I must now clarify how we might assess the theological contribution of this particular group of Congregational ordinary theologians. There are two related problems here (discussed in detail in Appendix B). The first is the peculiar situation of Congregationalists with respect to doctrine as such. This denomination traditionally does not adhere to the practice of requiring

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<sup>96</sup> It is not necessary to identify these principles in order to know that they are at odds with current doctrinal expression. Lindbeck recognises that the judgement of ordinary theologians is intuitive, based on their experience of seeking to practice this aspect of their religion. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 32-6.

subscription to creeds and is suspicious of anything which could undermine local authority. Liturgical resources are not compulsory within Congregational churches. The second is the problem of defining the normative tradition with respect to LAD. To be more specific, there is a noticeable lack of clarity with regard to Protestant doctrine in general in the UK, although not in the Catholic Church. The same situation exists with respect to funeral liturgies (see Appendix C). This, I believe, is very different from certain other doctrinal areas, such as Christology. A straightforward comparison with existing doctrine is therefore problematic. It would thus be useful to have a further source against which to compare the ordinary eschatology of this project.

At an early stage of this project I realised that it was important to review my own theology and practice concerning LAD. I therefore undertook a systematic review of my funeral practice (Appendix C) and began to explore the relevant literature. Tom Wright is remarkable in providing an unequivocally clear statement of what we should believe concerning ‘life *after* LAD’, and why we should believe it.<sup>97</sup> His views may therefore provide a useful additional source of comparison for the ordinary theology of LAD found within my congregation, and I therefore set out his position in detail in Appendix D. Wright’s claim as to why his position should be accepted also raises wider issues concerning how we might assess the contribution of ordinary theology in general. How far his ‘correct’ biblical view is actually reflected in the beliefs of ordinary Christians is an important question for this project. One response to this can be given from existing empirical data concerning belief in LAD, which I set out in Appendix A. From this it is clear that his views are at odds with the expressed opinions of many clergy and lay members of his own church, and others. The findings of this project confirm major points of difference with the views of ordinary theologians. His primary claim, however, is that his view is completely in line with biblical teaching, and therefore should be accepted by ordinary and extraordinary theologians alike. This claim must also face the challenge of the findings of this project: these ordinary theologians demonstrate remarkable scepticism about

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<sup>97</sup> This phrase denotes the central contention of Wright that LAD is only the first, temporary stage of our post-mortem Christian destiny. The correct biblical view, and that of the early Christian church, is that resurrection does not mean LAD, but rather ‘was a way of talking about a new bodily life *after* whatever state of existence one might enter immediately upon death. It was, in other words, life *after* ‘life after death’.’ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 163.

academic and church authority with regard to biblical interpretation (see 3.6 Little Trust in Academy and Church' page 98).

I had a growing sense from my experience of taking funerals that the general understanding of people (including my own congregation) concerning LAD was quite varied; a feeling reinforced by a request received in 2005 to perform an exorcism. In responding to this request it became clear that members of my congregation held a wide variety of views regarding the presence of the dead, ghosts, spirits, and other supernatural phenomena.<sup>98</sup> I also realised when beginning this project that I had never dealt specifically with the topic of LAD within themed services or Bible study groups, although I obviously had in more general terms at Easter and in funeral services. I therefore delivered two linked services in July 2008 which looked specifically at how we might understand LAD from a Christian perspective. Having decided that Wright could usefully provide a source for comparison, I decided to focus on his (biblical) view in the first of these services, and to focus on the (philosophical) views of Marilyn McCord Adams in the second.<sup>99</sup> In the first service I was trying to suggest that there were key biblical issues to look at when considering LAD, and that Wright, as both a renowned biblical scholar and local bishop, was a notable voice in this area. Within the interviews I did not ask specifically about his views, nor did I in the services convey his views as the only or the obvious way of perceiving LAD.<sup>100</sup> However, I thought it important to at least introduce his ideas, alongside those of others, to my congregation.

Wright is obviously polemical in approach, and presents a condensed but cumulative case for his position. However, there was a sense in which I felt that in conveying his views I had been overwhelming my congregation with a huge array of 'corrections' of popular misunderstandings and 'correct' interpretations of passages of Scripture. Indeed, across his related publications on LAD Wright conveys the strong impression that it all just *has* to fit, and should not be contradicted; his views will sort out all possible doubts, quell all possible dispute

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<sup>98</sup> This request concerning exorcism prompted me to lead a debate within my church on the paranormal in general, and to undertake a small academic project on the matter as part of my MA in Theological Research at Durham.

<sup>99</sup> Several members of my congregation had heard McCord Adams speak about her theodicy some months earlier at Durham Cathedral.

<sup>100</sup> It should be noted that only two interviewees referred to these services: one of these noted a non-Wright view of the interim period, and the other offered some opinions on Wright's Grove pamphlet which he had read.

or counter-claim, and refute scholars who disagree. I noted, however, that immediately following the first service some people informed me very clearly that, in effect, ‘it doesn’t matter what he says, I still believe in a soul!’ Wright, then, seems to provide an appropriate and interesting comparison to these ordinary theologians.

## 2. PROCESS AND METHOD

An appropriate methodology was developed and has previously been assessed at earlier stages of this degree.<sup>101</sup> It is summarised in Appendix E. Set out below are the subsequent stages of application of this methodology.

Questions for the interview developed over time from the basis of ongoing engagement with relevant literature plus feedback from supervisors, the Ethics Committee, other doctoral students during the Summer Schools, and members of my congregation. Areas of inquiry not originally envisaged were included as a result of this process; for example, communication with the dead. I paid particular attention to the phrasing and order of the questions, and to the interview technique and style, so that questions would not be ‘leading’ to the participant. It was important to allow time and space for the participant to develop her own approach to and understanding of the issues.

Two pilot interviews were conducted in June: one with a person in the church whom I know very well (to test out my dual role), and one with a person who attends another church (to test the intelligibility of questions). These pilot interviews generally confirmed the process and questions, but showed that I needed to be flexible with regard to the order of the interview schedule. The final version of the interview schedule is provided in Appendix F. It should be noted that this was not a rigid template: the order of questions varied significantly depending on the ‘flow’ of the conversation, and not all questions were covered in every interview. Each interview was unique in this sense, which is partly why I have not adopted a quantitative approach when reporting the data. The small sample size is also a factor in this decision.

In May 2009 I spoke in a Sunday service on why the opinions of ‘ordinary’ believers are important, and research participant information sheets and consent forms were given out in services at the beginning of June 2009 (see Appendix F).

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<sup>101</sup> My basic research model was developed for the ARMPT (Advanced Research Methods in Practical Theology) module, which was assessed in August 2008. A literature search was also part of this module. This methodology has been updated as appropriate, for example, with regard to recent findings from the ARCS project. My approach to interviews was developed within the ‘Social Scientific Methods in the Study of Religion’ module, and assessed in April 2009. Both of these documents are summarised and presented as Appendix E.

From June to October 2009 a total of 25 interviews were conducted<sup>102</sup>, and a group meeting was held on 17 February 2010. One further interview was conducted with a member of my previous Oxford congregation in February 2011, which provided an opportunity to check (to some extent) whether the findings of the Whitley Bay interviews were unusual. The Oxford interview suggested that they were not; the same major themes were present. The interviews ranged in length from 40 minutes to 1 hour 46 minutes. Most lasted well over an hour, and most were conducted in the homes of the subjects. The interviewees were given full information regarding the research objectives and method, and had a real opportunity to question anything before agreeing to participate. The sample was self-selecting. I invited all members of my present congregation to participate in the research (by e-mail, and personal/general invitation); 26 out of a possible 37 people took part (70% response). Of the eleven who did not take part, three were spouses of those who did; two were ill at the time (including one who was a spouse); four had very strong or recent bereavement experiences; and the other three were possibly suspicious of the 'academic' nature of the exercise.

Of the total of 26 completed interviews, eight were with male interviewees. Two interviewees were aged 19 years (one male and one female); two were over 19 but under 40 years (one male and one female); one was between 41 and 49 years (female); eight were between 50 and 59 years (all female); three were between 60 and 69 years (two female and one male); and ten were 70 years or over (six female and four male). Family connections between participants were noted, and there was some evidence of commonality of views within one family but not in others. There was no evidence of family or friend collusion, although there was general interest in the views of others.

In the invitations to participate, and before every interview, I particularly stressed that it was the participant's views which were sought. I did not give out the detailed interview schedule in advance, but rather indicated only broad general areas for discussion prior to the interview. I believed that detailed prior information might stifle discussion and spontaneity. My approach seems justified in so far as the interviews were fully wide-ranging and rarely followed the order

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<sup>102</sup> One further interview was conducted but lasted only ten minutes. I stopped the interview because the interviewee was becoming emotionally upset to an extent which was pastorally of concern. This was the only such reaction, although several other interviewees had strong but temporary emotional responses to various parts of the interview. I stressed the possibility of this happening at the beginning of each interview, and emphasised that the interview could be stopped or abandoned at any time.

of the schedule. There were several instances of people who had prepared an account of their views in advance, and a few interviews started with the subject reading out pre-prepared statements concerning their experiences of bereavement. This suggests that if more detailed information had been given in advance there may have been less spontaneous discussion.

Several interviewees said they would like the opportunity to talk further and hear the views of others, so I arranged an open meeting at my house on 17 February 2010 which 12 interviewees (i.e. 48% of participants) attended. This meeting was recorded with their permission and provides a rich source of additional but related data. There seemed to have been little, if any, informal discussion by church members concerning these matters in the past, and the interviewees showed a general reluctance to talk about death and afterlife even to friends and family. I was curious, therefore, about what would be shared, and whether key themes from the interviews would be discussed openly. I invited them to talk about anything they wished in relation to the interviews, but I also asked if they would consider three particular areas: their thoughts on the interview experience itself; whether it had made them think about these things subsequently, or had changed their views at all; and whether the interview process had changed their relationship with me (as their minister). A key reason for this meeting was their curiosity about the views of others, and apparent in the group meeting was a need on the part of some to check their views against those of others. Two issues were 'checked' in this way: judgement (any form of punishment or hell), and experience of the Spiritualist Church. The checking, as one would expect, came from those with a strongly held view, or doubt, concerning these areas.

There was a very positive response to both the interview process itself and the continuing effect of this process. I gave considerable prior attention to reflexive and ethical issues concerning the dual role of the interviewer-minister (see Appendix E). In practice, this dual role proved not to be a problem, and actually had real advantages. It was said by several people that they would not have talked so openly to someone they did not know well. The interviews were manageable in a pastoral sense; some necessary follow-ups were easily identified within the interviews, with no conflict of 'role'.<sup>103</sup> I am confident that no harm

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<sup>103</sup> However, it became clear to me during data analysis that there was a 'pastoral line' which I could not cross, that is, a point where I was not prepared to attach motivations to, or explanations of, what had

had been done by these interviews, and in fact, quite the reverse. The following evidence from the group discussion is unequivocal.

## 2.1 A REAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE LEADING TO FURTHER REFLECTION

Laura<sup>104</sup> began the discussion by saying,

Well it was an interesting process I thought. I had certainly thought about it for quite a long time before, ... But I don't think I'd ever tried to articulate it. And that was actually quite difficult. ... But it was quite a good exercise actually, just trying to do that, to see just whether what you were saying actually made sense to you when you heard it out loud.

Felicity commented,

I thought it was very useful having structured questions, I wasn't expecting that. I thought you were going to say, 'right, just tell me what you think'. So that was really useful, ... And then of course you would say, 'why do you think that?', which you're good at aren't you [laughter]... so you've got to qualify what you said, and so it really made you think. It's certainly made me think about it more before, during, and after and talk about it to other people, ... friends in other churches, and ... they were interested.

I asked at the group meeting if the interview had helped people think about these things, or had they always thought about these issues in this kind of detail?

Imogen replied, 'I've always believed in an afterlife, but I can't say that I ever thought about what form it would particularly take. And the interview certainly made me start thinking about it, and I've thought about it since.'

Within the interviews themselves there was also evidence of a positive learning experience. For example, Joselyn concluded her interview by saying, 'I think I maybe would like to say that I appreciated being made to think about these things. ... I'll probably go away and maybe think a little bit more about it Michael.' Katie commented, 'I think it's been a very good exercise this, in making you think. And I think maybe more should be done to make people question, or make me question, and to think about things more thoughtfully.'

Ursula said at the end of her interview, 'I think it's interesting and it makes you [pause] clarify your own thoughts to some extent. But it also makes you realise that you could change and learn, and if you asked me again in ten years

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been said by certain individuals which relied on privileged personal knowledge that I hold, or which could otherwise identify and potentially embarrass those concerned.

<sup>104</sup> All data has been anonymised by the use of pseudonyms. All names are fictitious.



time I might have different answers.’ Vera said she had never done an interview before without being given set questions on paper, but thought this approach was good because the interviewer was able to explain things and make the questions clear. She also felt that there was lots of time to say everything, and commented that ‘you don’t think about half the things yourself, until somebody asks you. ... You know, because it’s not something that you actually really know about, just ideas that you’ve got in your head about how you think it would be. ... It’s a learning process.’

There were many examples of views being clarified and refined within the interview. This, I suggest, is evidence of the significant difference between a person answering a defined set of questions in a highly structured interview or completing a questionnaire, and undertaking a semi-structured conversation such as this. The ability to reflect as part of the process is important in providing real ‘depth’ to the answers and beliefs expounded. Responses even to the earliest questions of the interview schedule show how the interviewees were already exploring, within their own thinking, wider related issues. Nearly every interview ‘flowed’ easily, with the interviewees often surprising themselves (and the interviewer) with the range and depth of their responses. Remarkable ‘schemes’ of afterlife were described, ranging from a dream-world where individual heavens are custom-made, to an afterlife of complete serenity where no recollection of this world was needed, and one where continued learning and development are the key characteristics. These afterlife schemes were usually inconsistent and unsystematic (by the standards of academic theology), but were nonetheless remarkable, and obviously of real importance for those relaying them.

## 2.2 AN EMPOWERING AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Patricia asked if anyone wished they hadn’t taken part. Claire replied, ‘I very much enjoyed, it’s not the right word, but I found it very interesting.’ She had moved ‘from a kind of blissful ignorance where I went “yeah, that’s fine”, to actually having to stop and think about it. And I think I’ve got more questions now than ever before.’

Imogen said that the interview process had not changed her relationship with the minister at all. Patricia disagreed, ‘I think because I felt very precious.’ She

commented that ‘I enjoyed having you to myself.’ The key factor for Patricia was being truly listened to. ‘I could have a one-to-one, and you weren’t in “tell” mode like, you know, when you are doing a sermon. ... so I really, really enjoyed it. ... your questions made me think of elements I hadn’t.’ She added that it was like the old fashioned way of a minster coming to see you at home, ‘and you did want to hear what I said, and you didn’t laugh. And you were totally non-judgemental, and I didn’t get any wry look from you. So yes, it did change [our relationship], but very much for the better.’

Felicity added, ‘it’s nice to have somebody listening to your opinions, for an hour or more, and not say anything.’ Patricia commented that in groups or with family you still get interrupted, but this was different, a one-to-one. Felicity likened it to counselling, “‘Cathartic”, is it called?’

## 2.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

All interviews were recorded and, where relevant, brief hand-written notes were also made. The recording was listened to shortly after or immediately following the interview, both to ensure that it was correctly recorded and securely stored, and to make brief notes as an immediate reaction to the interview. This was important in identifying particular issues which were emerging so that clarification or confirmation of such areas might be sought in subsequent interviews. For example, how the physical resurrection of Jesus was seen was both surprising and consistent in the early interviews, and so was specifically ‘tested’ in later interviews.

The question then arose as to how best to further process this data so that analysis could be undertaken in a meaningful and efficient way. Should full verbatim transcripts of all interviews be undertaken? Is this the necessary or the most effective approach for a project of this nature? There are several generally assumed benefits of a full verbatim transcript, some of which depend on the transcription being undertaken by the interviewer herself. Full transcription helps ensure that important data is not missed, and develops a clear audit trail of data analysis (for supervisors and others). When undertaken by the interviewer herself, it can bring the interviewer closer to the data, and can help the interviewer better interpret and validate the data by a process of recall (of non-verbal signals or

emotions, for example) and reflection on the recorded material. However, it is also claimed by some that the case for reliability, validity and veracity of data via full verbatim transcription is not proven, and that given the potential for error in verbal transcription, a data trail is better situated in the original recordings themselves.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, most if not all of the advantages of the interviewer undertaking transcription can still be realised with partial rather than full verbatim transcription. The benefit of iterative case notes and repeated listening to and reflection on the recordings, which are the original full record of the nuanced and complex interactions of the interviewer and interviewee, should not be underestimated. It is impossible to capture everything in a written transcript, the production of which, even in full verbatim form, is a selective and interpretive process.<sup>106</sup> ‘Considering that the process of transcription should be more about interpretation and generation of meaning from the data rather than being a simple clerical task, the need for verbatim transcription in every research project that generates verbal interview data must be questioned.’<sup>107</sup>

The guiding principles should be to transcribe only as much as is needed, and that the actual transcribing should be selective – based on the needs and character of the research project. ‘The bottom line is that the theory should guide not only what you look for and where you go to find it in the field, but also what you look for in your data. ... In the end, it is you who must decide ... just how much of your interviews and field notes to transcribe.’<sup>108</sup> ‘For some analyses, it may not be necessary to transcribe an entire interview. Selected sentences, passages, paragraphs, or stories relevant to the research question or theory may be all that are needed.’ Key factors are that ‘the text selected for transcription should take into account the analytical contribution it will provide to the overall study’, and that ‘the level of transcription should complement the level of the analysis.’<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth J. Halcomb, and Patricia M. Davidson, ‘Is Verbatim Transcription of Interview Data Always Necessary?’, *Applied Nursing Research* 19 (2006), 38-42  
<http://xa.yimg.com/kq/groups/18751725/575774103/name/Is+verbatim+transcription+of+interview+data+always+necessary.pdf> (11 February 2010).

<sup>106</sup> See Julia Bailey, ‘First Steps in Qualitative Data Analysis: Transcribing’, *Family Practice* 25 (2008), 127-131 <http://fampra.oxfordjournals.org/content/25/2/127.full.pdf+html> (11 February 2010).

<sup>107</sup> Halcomb and Davidson, ‘Verbatim Transcription of Interview Data’, 40.

<sup>108</sup> Anselm L. Strauss, and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990), 30-1.

<sup>109</sup> Eleanor McLellan, Kathleen M. MacQueen, and Judith L. Neidig, ‘Beyond the Qualitative Interview: Data Preparation and Transcription’, *Field Methods* 15, no. 1, (2003), 66-7  
<http://fmj.sagepub.com/content/15/1/63.full.pdf+html> (12 February 2010).

The question of available resource is also relevant. To transcribe approximately 30 hours of taped interviews would take between 180 and 240 hours of work, so the effectiveness of this effort must be assured. If the work were to be undertaken by a professional transcribing service, the cost would be of the order of £2,600, and would raise issues of reliability of the transcript.<sup>110</sup> But even when transcription is undertaken by the interviewer herself, the transcript is an evolving flexible object which continually evolves and changes depending on the specific needs and context of a printed presentation.<sup>111</sup> The transcription process itself is also, of course, theory laden. Choices made by the researcher reflect the theories they hold and the limit of their interpretation.<sup>112</sup>

Swinton and Mowat demonstrate that data analysis is not a simple single event in the research process but can in practice be ‘a cycle of tentative construction, deconstruction, and reformulation which occurred as an ongoing conversation between the researcher and the congregation, the researcher and outside texts and the researcher and the accounts given by the congregation.’<sup>113</sup> The methodology of this research project makes it clear that ongoing conversation with theological and social scientific texts and ideas, as well as with people outside the research context, is an essential element of data interpretation. This is another reason why full verbal transcription of interview data may not be appropriate, if it were to solidify the data in a form which constrains this ongoing process. Data management needs to retain a flexibility which facilitates this, and therefore the original interview recordings play a crucial role.

A full transcript was produced for a pilot interview, which confirmed that this was neither necessary nor the best use of limited resources. In the context of this research project a hermeneutical process of data analysis is considered both

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<sup>110</sup> The role of the transcriber is critical and key factors influencing accuracy of the final transcript include: choices concerning notation; how to listen to the recording, while typing or before typing; the ‘distance’ of the transcriber from the actual event; how to capture emotion and other relevant aspects of the recorded material; class or cultural differences between interviewee, interviewer, and transcriber. See Lynne M MacLean, Mechthild Meyer, and Alma Estable, ‘Improving Accuracy of Transcripts in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Health Research* 14, no. 1 (2004), 113-23 <http://qhr.sagepub.com/content/14/1/113.full.pdf> (11 February 2010).

<sup>111</sup> See Lorenza Mondada, ‘Commentary: Transcript Variations and the Indexicality of Transcribing Practices’, *Discourse Studies* 9, no. 6 (2007), 809-21 <http://dis.sagepub.com/content/9/6/809.full.pdf> (11 February 2010).

<sup>112</sup> See Judith C. Lapadat, and Anne C. Lindsay, ‘Transcription in Research and Practice: From Standardisation of Technique to Interpretive Positionings’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (1999), 64-86 <http://qix.sagepub.com/content/5/1/64.full.pdf+html> (12 February 2010).

<sup>113</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 146.

effective and appropriate, and full verbatim transcription unnecessary. There is no single reality captured in the recording, and meaning is progressively refined and revealed through a reflexive and iterative analysis. The stages of data analysis are as follows:

- a) Recording of the interview and group meeting, with concurrent note taking as appropriate.
- b) Review of the recording soon after the interview, with reflexive addition or amendment of notes. Key issues of interviewer practice and interviewee response identified for future interviews.
- c) After interviews completed, all recordings listened to again in original order and detailed but partial transcription undertaken based on the interview schedule itself as a *theme proforma*.<sup>114</sup>
- d) Producing partial transcripts in thematic form is itself an iterative and reflexive process which highlights, refines and links issues across interviews.
- e) A more complete transcript of the February group meeting (a more free-ranging discussion of 76 minutes duration) was produced and cross-linked as appropriate with interview themes.
- f) A final review of key themes and supporting transcription, referring back to original recordings as appropriate.

All of this took place against a background of continuing reflection on and interaction with theological and social science texts and themes, and with people ‘outside’ the project. This hermeneutic process continued with the production of the thesis, where further refining of arguments led to further reflection on (and listening to) the data, and so on. At no point was the data considered in isolation.

The key findings of ‘ordinary eschatology’ are summarised in the following chapter, together with relevant theological and other comment. Such comment can sometimes fall naturally within the discussion, but at other times lengthy footnotes are used to provide a sub-text of comment rather than interrupting the natural flow of the discussion.

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<sup>114</sup> Despite flexibility within the interviews regarding the order of discussion, analysis was greatly simplified by the clear structure of the interview schedule. Responses from interviewees were notable and surprising in many respects, but did not stray ‘outside’ the schedule categories. Analysis is therefore based on the interview schedule categorisation. This is not a limitation of the interview process but rather reflects what actually happened in the interviews: the interviewer was not only listening for these things and ignoring anything outside the question structure.

### 3. ORDINARY ESCHATOLOGY DISCOVERED

#### 3.1 THERE IS A LIFE AFTER DEATH

In response to the first substantial question of the interview, all participants expressed belief in some form of afterlife. This is an interesting finding in itself. However, there were significant differences in the level of clarity and the degree of certainty with which this belief was expressed. For some this meant belief without a clear understanding of how, or where. For others, it was as much about hope as about knowledge.

Yes, well, yes I believe so. I don't know how, I don't understand how, but I do believe yes. [Olive]

I believe it, but I mean [pause] nobody knows do they, that there is life after death. You just hope, but we don't know. [Dawn]

Maurice Wiles believes that there is a 'fundamental inconsistency in the idea of a God whose purpose in creation includes as so prominent a feature the emergence of personal life capable of response to him, but whose purpose also allows for the utter extinction of those relationships of love, developed so gradually, so profoundly and yet with such tantalising incompleteness.'<sup>115</sup> In similar vein, Paul and Linda Badham claim that the Christian hope of LAD relies on 'the sense of entering a living relationship with God and trusting in the reality of that fellowship against the force of death. Throughout history it is probable that this has been the decisive element in the case for belief in a future life.'<sup>116</sup> John Hick argues that if belief in God is accepted (that is, a theistic position is adopted) then LAD is very probable. 'For if we are the creatures of a loving God it is reasonably to be expected that God should make it possible for us to fulfil the potentialities of our human nature, potentialities which are not fulfilled for most people within the circumstances of this present world.'<sup>117</sup> The ordinary theologians of this study took it as axiomatic that a loving God would create a fulfilled future for his human children.

Many were clearer and more certain in their articulation of what happens after death, but there was a general view that complete clarity is probably both

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<sup>115</sup> Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1974), 137

<sup>116</sup> Paul Badham, and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan, 1982), 122-3.

<sup>117</sup> Stephen T. Davis (ed.), *Death and Afterlife* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1989), 34 - Hick's response to Kai Nielson.

impossible and unnecessary. I received comments from ordinary theologians about their 'ordinariness'. Olive expressed her concern within the context of talking about the soul, which she struggled to describe.

I'm not clever enough to understand what [the soul is], you know. And that worries me sometimes ... That I don't understand, that I'm not clever enough to understand, ... I mean I believe totally, I always have done. ... I do believe that there's something other than this; and I do believe that we'll meet again somehow, somewhere. But I don't understand how, I can't fathom how.

I asked her if she would like to understand it more. 'I don't know if I would Michael. No I don't think I would, because I can accept it, you know.' We then went on to consider how souls might recognise one another. Olive said she believed that she would meet her parents and husband again in the afterlife. 'And that's when I start and think, well, I don't really understand it but I do believe it, and, you know, do I really need to understand?',<sup>118</sup>

Gregory also had trouble in clarifying the idea of soul.

We use these words to explain something we don't understand. I still don't understand it but we still use the words because we've nothing else to use. ... You don't actually know what happens when we die. We believe things, ... We've got to describe it as something, something lives on, so we use those words. That's the best I can do.

Jacob expressed something similar.

I mean I don't know how, but like my mother, I just have a simple belief; I just believe that that there is something. I don't know why I believe it. I couldn't argue the case with anybody. But I would keep my stance that I just believe it, and to me it's real.

The point here is not that these views are self-confessedly 'ordinary', but rather that they are genuine expressions of real belief which clearly have an effect on these people. Ordinary theologians are expressing ordinary theology in the only way they can. Perhaps less-ordinary theologians (who themselves were once much more 'ordinary') might do well to remember this sort of humility about what we know, and this sort of commitment to what we believe.

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<sup>118</sup> This brings to mind the famous words of St. Anselm, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 243-244, 'I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; But I believe so that I may understand; and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe I shall not understand.'

### *Ordinary Theology Being Done*

These are only a few examples of clear and honest statements from ordinary theologians doing ordinary theology: they are statements of *belief in* things which are important to how that person lives a life of faith. They are both reflective and affective; that is, they involve emotional commitment. They are not fully explained, or systematically presented, but are nonetheless fundamentally theological. I would claim this of at least 23 of the 26 interviewees. The vast majority of interviewees displayed both a sufficient level of critical reflection and personal affect to be considered as ordinary *theologians*. It was in doubt only with three interviewees: which is not a negative judgement, but merely an observation that not all conversation about LAD is theologically significant. This, of course, is not to say that all the other interviewees were in a high ‘academic’ state of cerebral contemplation concerning LAD. It is clear that for many people the interview itself caused them to think and reflect beyond their normal boundaries, surely a key educational benefit of this kind of theological listening. Jacob confessed that his lack of clarity is ‘terrible isn’t it. I’m 63 and I haven’t given this a huge amount of thought.’

Another indication that ordinary *theology* was being done was awareness of the force with which their desires might be linked to their beliefs. Early in the group discussion, Patricia recognised that ‘we all want different things don’t we? We’re all perhaps hoping for different things.’ Towards the end of the meeting Joselyn asked, ‘Are we being very cosy with ourselves? Are we telling ourselves that it’s going to be fine?’ Joselyn was airing the worry that perhaps their beliefs could be a self-fulfilling wish.<sup>119</sup> Did she believe nice, comfortable things about the afterlife because this is what she wanted to find there? However, there was a clear response to this. Alice said, ‘Why believe in God if there isn’t going to be something perfect at the end? ... I don’t see any point in believing if heaven isn’t going to be perfect.’ Laura reminded people that ‘One of the key points is actually that we gain eternal life.’ Dawn was sure that Jesus wouldn’t have said that ‘in my house there are many mansions’ if he didn’t mean it.

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<sup>119</sup> The ‘wish-fulfilment’ criticism is dealt with more fully below in the conclusions. See ‘A Potential Criticism’ page 137.



## *Individual Heavens – A Remarkable Solution*

Perhaps the most remarkable overall scheme of LAD, which is worth setting out in some detail to illustrate the level of ordinary theology being articulated, came from Allan. There were two obvious and major issues for him concerning the afterlife: how can we meet people in the afterlife and resume a previous relationship; and how can we *not* meet the people we don't want to? In order to overcome these two issues, Allan explained a complete scheme of individual dream-like heavens, which bears a striking resemblance to some of the ideas of H.H. Price.<sup>120</sup> Allan does not know of this scholar; the main inspiration for his afterlife scheme is reflection on his life experience. The purpose of an afterlife is to provide the fulfilment and happiness which have not been obtained in this earthly life. Allan said he had adapted some of his ideas from a Tom Cruise movie,<sup>121</sup> but I was surprised he didn't mention the now well-documented, immersive experience of computer gaming.

So the afterlife for Allan is an individual mental construct of the deceased, a world specific to them which is populated only by those they want to be there. This dream-like world is experienced as entirely real and physical. Those who populate your afterlife world can be either still living or dead, the point being that it is not actually them, but rather 'your kind of expectation' of them. They 'would be there, but only as how you want [them] to be there'. Furthermore, you can choose to be whatever age you want and in whatever physical state you want in your afterlife, and can even set the geographical location. The key thing is that those you bring into your afterlife world will be at the appropriate age and physical state *in relation to you*. So your grandparents, children, siblings, partner, friends, will all be at the 'correct' age; the relationship will therefore be maintained.

There would be no real contact between individual afterlife worlds, which could be heavens or hells. One can choose to ask God for help in making your

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<sup>120</sup> H. H. Price, 'Survival and the Idea of "Another World"' in J. R. Smythies (ed.), *Brain and Mind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 1-24.

<sup>121</sup> 'Vanilla Sky' (Paramount Pictures, 2001). This is a science fiction story of a man badly disfigured in an accident who chooses to go into a cryogenic state until medical technology improves such that he can be fully restored to health. While in the cryogenic state he is given a 'designer dream' to live in. But this dream actually goes wrong (which is reminiscent of the solipsistic concern recognised by Price) and he is rescued by a wise figure in the form of 'tech support'. The hero then chooses to return back to the real world and normal mortality.

world, which would therefore be heavenly; or you can try to create your own, which may lead to a personal hell. If you ask God to help, then this will be ongoing in that he will continue to guide your world so that it does not distort itself in damaging ways (cf. Price's concern about solipsism). This all happens very quickly after death, but not at the point of death. Rather, there are a few days of unconscious rest; the personal world comes into existence at the point of your being 'properly laid to rest' by either burial or cremation. God will assist those who have, for example, suffered from a mental handicap in this life to be fully restored to mental capacity so that they could choose any sort of personal afterlife. This would imply a view of 'soul' as the untouched inner person, but Allan said he had no conception of what the word soul meant. In your personal afterlife you would only remember the good bits of your earthly life, and you would have no awareness of what continues to happen on earth. There are no ghosts or spirits roaming the earth, or NDEs: the only supernatural thing that could happen is that people on earth could dream of a deceased person, which is a sort of precursor of the individual afterlife.

### *Disembodied Existence*

The famous thought experiment of H.H. Price<sup>122</sup> provides Paul Badham with a solution to how disembodied existence could actually work. He agrees with Price that when we dream we have real experiences, and therefore the 'image world' could be a heavenly space. The problem, though, which Price recognised, is that it can suggest the creation of a separate subjective private world for each person. Price argues that a form of telepathy could facilitate real communication between discarnate souls to produce shared worlds, a different one for 'each group of like-minded personalities' (although Price confesses that he is not clear exactly what would define such a group). The key addition to (extension of) the Price dream-world which Badham provides is the role that God can play. A virtue of Price's theory 'is that it can do justice to the Christian conviction that in the next world God will be much more real to us than He is in our present existence.'<sup>123</sup> Badham suggests that 'God would become the most vital subject of

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<sup>122</sup> See also J. C. Yates, 'Disembodied Existence in an Objective World', *Religious Studies* 23, no. 4 (1987), 531-8, who seeks to make Price's argument more Christian; for example, by arguing that God could give each one of us a 'body image' in our disembodied state to facilitate social life.

<sup>123</sup> Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?*, 121.

our awareness. This would exactly tie in with the belief that the “beatific vision” is to be the most significant element in the life of heaven.<sup>124</sup> Badham suggests a temporary initial solipsistic stage for the dead as they create an image world largely of those still living, which would provide valuable time for reflection and self judgement on our earthly lives, a necessary first step in continuing development. But God can then provide clear and direct guidance to us in our disembodied state, and will open up an infinite and exciting horizon of possibilities for learning and growth: in effect, an amalgamation of the anthropomorphic and theocentric views of heaven.

The Price view of disembodied existence also solves for Badham (as for Allan) the big practical problem of heaven concerning reunion with people, a problem that several of my interviewees recognised. If there were a common afterlife world, then how could generations be bridged? ‘A young mother who had lost a child of ten might long to see her loved one again, but how could the child recognise as his mother the woman of eighty who had just arrived in the resurrection world.’ The Price hypothesis offers a way out of this:

For in a private world with telepathic interactions we could each imagine the people known to us as we had known them, and thus I could communicate with my grandfather and image him as a man of eighty, while my great-great-grandfather could image him as a child of ten, though perhaps in process of time telepathic interaction would enable us both to move toward a common image.<sup>125</sup>

As I have shown above, Allan related a view of the afterlife remarkably similar to many aspects of the Price-Badham hypothesis, without any awareness whatsoever of the academic philosophical debate outlined above. Philosophical speculation, like biblical interpretation, is not simply the province of scholars.

### 3.2 AN IMMEDIATE AND NON-PHYSICAL AFTERLIFE

These ordinary theologians are clear that the afterlife is immediate. One argument in support of this is the very common sense approach of Gregory. ‘I don’t think there’s any point in having a gap of nothingness. If you’ve got a spirit it’s there, it can’t sort of suddenly go into oblivion or come back into existence a

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<sup>124</sup> Paul Badham, *Christian Beliefs About Life After Death* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 145.

<sup>125</sup> Badham, *Christian Beliefs*, 144.

fortnight later sort of thing. So it's immediate, no gap.' Gregory, of course, sees the spirit as something which cannot die, unlike the body.

There was a common misunderstanding, or perhaps reinterpretation, of the question asked at the beginning of the interview, 'Are people whom you have known and who have died in any way still alive?' On a number of occasions the response was to provide stories of their experience of the continuing earthly presence of the dead. This is interesting not just in providing evidence that this is a common phenomenon (see 'The Presence of the Dead' page 122), but also because it clearly illustrates that a key reason for believing in an immediate post-mortem afterlife is experience of the continuing life of the dead. Jacob can sometimes see their faces.

I don't know how it happens but their face will appear and you feel them close to you. ... I just have these lovely thoughts, and it's quite comforting really [laughter]. And I actually end up talking to them, which is strange, I mean is that nuts?

Claire is clear that her father is still in some sense present with his family. She feels this when things remind her of him, but, 'it's a bit more than a reminder, [pause] it's almost like dad saying "I'm still here".' Dawn feels her deceased mum is sometimes with her in the house, and Nora believes the familiar dead are all around her, and that heaven 'exists all over in a very wide and unending place'. Joselyn talks to her dead husband, and Imogen to her dead father. Others expressed a clear sense in which they still feel guided by their deceased relatives.

A specific question about NDEs was asked in the interview, but two people raised the issue before the question was put, and again in connection with the issue of an immediate afterlife. Janet related a story from her mother that her grandfather, minutes before his death and in a very weak state, sat bolt upright and 'said my Gran's name and said she's waiting on me'. Shortly after her grandfather's death, Janet also had a very clear and influential experience

I'd gone to bed one night and I woke up, and I swear I'm not mad, I will swear to anybody, my granddad was sitting by my bedside, and I opened my eyes and he had his hand on me. ... and I closed my eyes and opened them again and he'd gone. And I think that was his way of saying goodbye to me and just kind of saying I'm OK now. [Laughter/emotion]

Charles had a very influential out of body experience which confirmed his view of an immediate post-mortem spiritual existence. He had been taken into hospital in an emergency and, while lying in bed on a ward,

can remember to this day being up above it looking down on my body presumably, in that bed, as clear as I'm seeing you. I was just very gently going upwards and I thought to myself I don't want to be up here I want to be back down there, and eventually woke up. And that experience has lived with me ever since.

Charles clarified that the spirit 'leaves the body and goes'. For him, the spirit is an 'inner being', because he could see the 'outer being', the body, down on the bed. 'So it had to be some inner being which had [pause] a form, or some form of intelligence, because I was awake or recognised what was happening. I knew that something was going on which wasn't right and I was determined to do something about it.' Charles explained that the body was down there, but that he was somewhere else. He doesn't think anyone else in the ward even noticed. The word 'spirit' is, for Charles, another way of saying soul.

Laura had been interested to hear from me recently (within the July 2008 services) about the idea held by some that there is an unconscious intermediate state post-mortem, in which we await final resurrection. But she had always felt that 'people do continue [immediately] in some form or another.' Only one interviewee thought there was a temporary unconscious state post-mortem. Hermione had received this view from her mother, and it was strongly linked by Hermione to a rejection of the supernatural. In other words, an unconscious interim state means that there cannot be any disturbed souls (ghosts): all are unconscious. Patricia talked of a conscious interim period of recuperation and healing, which is necessary not only for those who had endured difficult deaths, but for all of us who will at least be surprised by death. 'I think for a period of time everybody will be in like a suspension or [pause] just peace and quiet, perhaps coming to terms with what happened to you. ... But [pause] that doesn't last forever.' It should be noted that even those who pointed to a two-stage LAD did not see the second stage as physical resurrection, but rather as a non-physical existence. Hermione believes that after the unconscious 'soul sleep' all souls enter a final, non-physical state of afterlife.<sup>126</sup>

Alice does not believe in an interim period because she thinks it is associated with the now outdated view of the second coming of Jesus.

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<sup>126</sup> Moltmann, 'Is There Life After Death?', 248, reminds us that in rejecting purgatory the Reformers 'were attacking only the concept of penance and the "penitential community of the living and the dead."' They were not criticising ... the idea that God's history with human beings continues after death. Nor were they calling in question the community of the living and the dead in Christ.'

I think that had a meaning at the time that it was said, that Jesus would come again because he'd been there and they'd seen him and, emm, knew about him; and they did honestly think he was going to come and everything would be right. And ... I can see that. [pause] But we're not going to wait for a second coming, because we know that, emm, 2000 years have gone by. ... So yes, I think that when we die we do [go straight to the afterlife].

This is actually an example of biblical reinterpretation due to a changing world view and historical experience (see Appendix H, 'Authorial World Views and Contemporary Science' page 224.).

### ***Strong Belief in a Soul/Spirit***

One of the clearest findings from this project is that *there is a natural and deep belief in soul/spirit among ordinary theologians*. Gregory is typical in thinking that 'the spirit or the soul lives on'. Patricia thinks the soul is 'us', and 'and it is just encompassed in this body that wears out and, ... goes and disappears.' Grace believes that when your body dies, 'you have a spirit and it's your spirit that goes wherever it goes, ... You've got a spirit; your body is nothing, it rots, it goes, it disappears. But your spirit is you.' Joselyn thinks that 'when you're dead your body is just a shell. That your soul or your spirit has been removed from it.'

There was an almost unanimous substance dualist view of the human person. For the subjects of this study, an obvious element of human experience is that they are composed of both a physical body and a spiritual self. Some were clear that the Bible talked of 'body and soul', and by the latter they meant a spiritual inner self. Felicity believes that 'it is mentioned a lot isn't it [in the Bible], that your soul survives'. Most people used the words 'soul' and 'spirit' almost interchangeably. Interviewees often used the word 'spirit' to start with; but when asked about what, if anything, they understood by 'soul', they usually responded that it was the same thing. Duncan said, 'I see a soul as being a sort of spiritual existence, I'm not quite sure that I could even begin to define it anymore. ... I sort of see it as the life and the spirit within a person.' Claire said soul was 'probably what I mean by spiritual, yes, so that part of you that is "you". ... That bit that you can't really describe because it just makes you, "you", and me, "me". That to me is your soul, is your spirit.' It is this which survives bodily death.

Existing empirical data shows a strong popular leaning toward a non-physical afterlife based on a surviving soul (see Appendix A). For instance, the ‘Rural Church Project’ found that the view of a soul passing on to another world was more than twice as popular as the idea of a bodily resurrection. Even more interesting is the fact that amongst the church sample (taken from the church electoral rolls) this difference was in fact more pronounced than with the general public sample: 68% of the church group accepted the soul idea, whereas only 24% affirmed bodily resurrection. ‘This raises some intriguing questions about recent church debates concerning the Resurrection of Jesus, on the assumption that it is not impossible for beliefs about self to be unrelated to beliefs about Jesus as far as Christians are concerned.’<sup>127</sup> A key finding of this project is that just such a separation is possible (see 3.5 What Jesus’ Resurrection Tells Us’, page 95).

Despite the creedal statements of a final bodily resurrection, there has also been for the vast majority of Christian history, and probably for the vast majority of Christian believers, a strong belief in survival of the ‘soul’, the ‘essential me’, following bodily death. Indeed, this is still part of official Roman Catholic teaching, albeit that the soul reunites with a body at the final resurrection.<sup>128</sup> The recent shift in protestant academic circles against any dualist conception of the human person is very significant in that it is actually a huge change, which apparently is at odds with popular protestant Christian understanding. An illustration of this is the reaction which Oscar Cullmann received to the publication of his argument against the immortal soul: ‘No other publication of mine has provoked such enthusiasm or such violent hostility.’<sup>129</sup> This disjunction is clearly evidenced in this interview data. Ordinary theologians are saying something very different from the recent protestant view, which is based largely on two contentious areas: the supposed distorting influence of Greek philosophy, and recent scientific discoveries regarding the physical understanding of the brain.

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<sup>127</sup> Douglas Davies, Charles Watkins, and Michael Winter, *Church and Religion in Rural England* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 256.

<sup>128</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Popular and Definitive Edition* (London: Burns & Oates, 2008) paragraphs 362-368. See also ‘Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology’, 1979, by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=4382&CFID=36566912&CFTOKEN=72991492> (5 May 2010).

<sup>129</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), preface.

A convincing defence of the substantial soul is still possible, however: I set this out in Appendix G.

Paul Badham argues that belief in God, in the soul, and in an afterlife are three interdependent beliefs; each relies on implicit assumptions about the validity of the others. The key thing about all religious faith, according to Badham, is a personal relationship of love and trust with God, and this is critical for afterlife belief. Each individual matters to God, so death will not break that relationship or destroy the loved individual. In fact the doctrine of God becomes irrelevant without belief in a future hope – ‘unless a Christian is willing to postulate a future life, any claim to believe in the fatherly care of an omnipotent God is without content.’<sup>130</sup> Badham claims that in trying to avoid the term ‘soul’, Christian writers use phrases such as ‘the essential part of what we are’, ‘the vital principle of our being’, ‘the pattern of what we are’, or ‘our moral and intellectual qualities’. But surely this is what soul has traditionally meant? ‘Hence, though many today deny the word, they find themselves wishing to affirm much that the word signifies.’ I believe Wright stands open to this accusation.<sup>131</sup> Badham points to a key ‘ordinary’ argument:

in the absence of any physical continuity, ‘I’ can still be ‘I’, only if it is possible to identify my self-hood with some non-physical principle of continuity. The word ‘soul’ is the historic term for this notion, and I think it can help to clarify discussion to use the expression, provided that it is understood that a modern exposition of the concept is not necessarily tied to all the ramifications associated with notions of soul in earlier worldviews.<sup>132</sup>

### ***Ordinary Reasons for Belief in Soul/Spirit***

#### *God is not physical*

Maurice Wiles also reminds us (in connection with claims that a ‘soul’ existence cannot be complete) that God is bodiless and inconceivable; but this is not, in Christian eyes, ground for denying his existence or regretting its form. Charles Taliaferro points out that if one assumes a theist position then many of the objections to dualism lose their force because one is already accepting that an

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<sup>130</sup> Paul Badham, ‘God, the Soul, and the Future Life’, in Davis (ed.), *Death and Afterlife*, 40-2

<sup>131</sup> N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: the Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999), 25.

<sup>132</sup> Badham, ‘God, the Soul, and the Future Life’, 47-8.



immaterial God created and interacts with this material world.<sup>133</sup> Duncan made this same point about the nature of God in his interview. ‘If you feel that God exists and Jesus exists and [pause] can influence you and you can communicate with them, ... And if that happens with us here because we are living in these bodies, then it seems to me it can also happen after physical death. I think that’s sort of, I think that’s the basis of my rationale.’ Wiles points out that when a Christian speaks about LAD, it is eternal life in relation to a disembodied God: embodiment may not be the easiest way to ensure relationship. He suggests that to talk of bodily resurrection is to try to convince ourselves that we can envisage what the afterlife would be like, and so give meaning to the concept of LAD. But he adds that this is not how we believe in God, where we have some pointers in our experience which allows us to commit ourselves to this belief but also to acknowledge that we cannot visualise it. Wiles suggests it should be the same with LAD; we should not be too concerned about ‘our inability to envisage that which we are led to affirm’. He believes that theologians should not be afraid to admit they don’t know the details.<sup>134</sup> Gooch also emphasises the point that God is non-bodily, so our promise of meeting God ‘face to face’ (1 Cor. 13) cannot involve a physical queuing up, but rather that God makes us more like him to enable this.<sup>135</sup>

### *Awareness of Self*

Wiles believes we have to ask, ‘are there features of the human situation as such which point towards a belief in immortality for man?’ In answer to this he points to the remarkable nature of our personal existence and the mysterious character of personal being. We can stand back and reflect on our self (‘the recessiveness of I’), and we are self-transcendent in the way we make free moral decisions. While such observations do not establish LAD, they at least provide restraint in ruling it out altogether. For us to know the truth of God’s plan of LAD there must be ‘at least some indications of its plausibility in human experience as such’.<sup>136</sup> Keith Ward argues that the human soul is known to itself in a quite

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<sup>133</sup> Charles Taliaferro, ‘On Human Nature, Personal Identity, and Eschatology’, in Jerry L. Walls (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 544-5.

<sup>134</sup> Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine* p.140-3.

<sup>135</sup> Gooch, P. W., ‘On Disembodied Resurrected Persons: A Study in the Logic of Christian Eschatology’, *Religious Studies* 17, no. 2 (1981), 199-213.

<sup>136</sup> Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, 133.

unique way, not by sense organs but by introspection. He further claims that ‘we are more certain of the distinctive existence of our own rational consciousness than we are of the truth of any wide-ranging theories of biology. The soul is known directly by each one of us.’ We see in contemporary culture a ‘battle for the soul’, for the idea of the soul. ‘But it is not a battle between science and religion. It is a battle between those who seek to extend proper biological and scientific methods and conclusions beyond their proper sphere, and those who are concerned to affirm the dignity and purpose of human life.’<sup>137</sup>

I suspect that one of the key factors underlying the views of these ordinary theologians with respect to soul/spirit is their sense of the experience of the inner self, the ‘I-perspective’. For Imogen, spirit or soul represent the ‘inner me.’ She clarified that ‘My inner me as far as I’m concerned is my spirit, what makes me. What makes me do what I do in the way that I do it.’ It is this which survives bodily death. Jacob defined the soul as ‘not my physical being, but basically what else I am, and what other people are; their emotions and whatever, and the things that make us tick, the things that make me, “me”. ... My other being if you like.’ At death it is this that survives and separates from the body.

### *The Identity Issue – How am I the Same ‘Me’?*

How do I remain ‘me’ in the afterlife? What is it that ensures my continuing personal identity? Hywel Lewis is not greatly worried by the problem of individuation here (how we could be individuals without bodies). ‘It has always seemed evident to me that everyone knows himself to be the being that he is in just being so. We identify ourselves to ourselves in that way, and not in the last resort on the basis of what we know about ourselves.’<sup>138</sup> Richard Swinburne counters that the answer to how we could distinguish between disembodied souls ‘is that the difference between souls is ultimate. They just differ *solo numero*. ... Some individuals, that is, have thisness, *haecceitas*, something which makes them different from other individuals of the same kind otherwise indistinguishable from them.’<sup>139</sup> Nancey Murphy argues that it is not the body ‘*qua* material object that

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<sup>137</sup> Keith Ward, *In Defence of the Soul* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 58-9.

<sup>138</sup> Hywel D. Lewis, ‘Immortality and Dualism’, in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 289. In the same volume (305-6) Godfrey Vesey disputes the ‘we just know’ argument of Lewis, especially his use of ‘I’ (as it is not the name of a thing).

<sup>139</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, rev. ed., 1997), 333.

constitutes our identities, but rather the higher capacities that it enables: consciousness and memory, moral character, interpersonal relations, and, especially, relationship with God.’<sup>140</sup> Consequently, ‘a replica or transformed version of my body with all my memories intact would not be I unless she possessed my virtues (or vices), affections, and moral perceptions.’ But physical and character criteria are inseparable. ‘Virtues are acquired by practice; practice makes stable changes in the strength of neural pathways.’ Certain interpersonal relationships are key for personal identity, so the afterlife must contain the same relationships. The most important is our relationship with Christ, so Murphy agrees ‘with those who emphasise that God’s remembering, recognising, and relating to me are essential to my post resurrection identity.’<sup>141</sup>

The key problem of personal identity is the diachronic one; how is a person at one time identical to a person at another time? People change over time. At the age of 54 I am completely unlike I was at the age of 10. Not only is my body (and its molecular composition) vastly different, but I also have different memories, attitudes and personality. Lynne Rudder Baker makes it clear that the required answer is not an epistemological one, but a metaphysical one; in other words, it is about what makes it true that I am the same person irrespective of whether anyone recognises the identity or not. The same is true of identity in the afterlife. Continuity via an immaterial substance (soul/mind), or physical substance (body), or psychological continuity (memory) is unfeasible for Baker. Her view ‘is that personal identity depends on a mental property – an essential property in virtue of which a person is a person (having a first-person perspective) and in virtue of which a person is the person she is (having that very first-person perspective).’<sup>142</sup> She proposes that a human person is constituted by a human body, but is not identical to that body: as a river is constituted by a large number of water molecules, but they are not the same over time and so the river is not identical with the water. Baker explains that ‘A first-person perspective is the ability to conceive of oneself as a person.’ The ‘stuff’ a person is made of is irrelevant. ‘*Person* is an ontological kind whose defining characteristic is a capacity for a

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<sup>140</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 132.

<sup>141</sup> Nancey Murphy, ‘The Resurrection Body and Personal Identity: Possibilities and Limits of Knowledge’, in Peters, Russel and Welker (eds.), *Resurrection*, 212-3.

<sup>142</sup> Lynne Rudder Baker, ‘Death And The Afterlife’, in William J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 369.

first-person perspective.’<sup>143</sup> Constitution is not identity: a person is not identical to her body. A human body is not a person without a first-person perspective.<sup>144</sup> So, Baker argues, with respect to resurrection, the same human person can exist without the same body (although for Baker they need some sort of body to support a first-person perspective). The constitution view means that in the interim period there is either an interim body, or there is a temporal gap in existence (because we must have a body for first-person perspective). But then what ‘continues’ in the gap? How does God retain my first-person perspective? She elsewhere makes the remarkable claim that an intermediate state is compatible with her constitution view because ‘there is no reason to think that the intermediate state must be a disembodied state. For all we know, persons in the intermediate state are constituted by intermediate-state bodies.’<sup>145</sup>

Overall I find that Baker adds little clarity by her ‘first person perspective’. The ordinary theologians of this project see it more clearly and simply: it is obviously ‘me’ that survives physical death (see ‘Strong Belief in a Soul/Spirit’ page 60). The substantial soul is an obvious conception for these ordinary believers because it explains how the *same* person continues beyond death, to an immediate non-physical afterlife. This is far more understandable than the monist position which says that at death you really do die, but that God somehow remembers ‘you’ for re-creation (re-embodiment) at some future point. It is also far more acceptable than the notion of unconscious interim existence (a substantial soul without mental capacity, because without body, survives and waits for re-embodiment).

### *The Dementia Problem – Where Has She Gone?*

A specific contemporary and earthly context reinforces this ordinary eschatology. The increase in various forms of dementia asks the question of continuing identity in an acute way, and the substantial soul provides an obvious explanation. The real person (soul/mind) is intact, hidden behind the distorted outward expression which is the result of a diseased brain. This is the best way in

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<sup>143</sup> Baker, ‘Death and the Afterlife’, 381-2.

<sup>144</sup> For a fuller discussion of this aspect see her *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>145</sup> Lynne Rudder Baker, ‘Christians Should Reject Mind-Body Dualism’, in Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. Vararagon (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 336.

which the ‘loss’ of the still-living person can be understood. So paradoxically, the increase in frequency of this terrible disease may actually reinforce the popular notion of soul.

Duncan is clear that such things as physical defects of the brain will not affect the soul in the afterlife; we will be free of any such physical impediments and memory/mental faculty will be restored. Katie also believes that dementia will be dealt with. ‘I would like to think that they have regenerated.’ In the afterlife ‘they’re not going to be suffering in any way at all’, because ‘it’s their inner being that’s up there’. Patricia believes that memory fades because of our brain, but the soul will be able to recall everything. Bernard believes that one’s memory would be replenished in the afterlife, so that all the important things could be remembered. ‘As you are getting older it’s the body that fails. And the mind may fail as well, but it’s an organ isn’t it? So I believe that ... once you’re free of that decaying organ then, yeah, I believe you’ll be ... [fine, with restored memory].’ For Bernard, it’s the same as with cancer; you wouldn’t take that with you into the afterlife.

These opinions about mental illness and dementia imply a traditional view of substance dualism. There is no evidence among these ordinary theologians of a physicalist or monist understanding of the human person.<sup>146</sup> To them, it is obvious that the essential ‘me’ cannot be irredeemably affected by physical illness of the brain. In the afterlife, the real ‘me’ will, of course, be there: fully restored and whole. Indeed, in my pastoral experience with this same group of people, this is how the ‘loss’ of a living person suffering from dementia is understood.

When subjects were asked if the dead would remember their earthly lives, the responses reflected on the issue of memory as an essential component of personal identity and continuity. Vera thought you would remember your earthly life, ‘because what you’ve done in your life is partly who you are. So if you’re going to exist at all, I think you must have some of that with you, and it would be pretty sad if you didn’t really, in a way.’ Ursula thought we would remember ‘parts of it, but not in every detail I don’t think.’ We would probably remember important and significant things, but not everything from childhood. Ursula pointed out that we don’t have complete memory now, so we probably won’t in the afterlife either.

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<sup>146</sup> The physicalist and monist positions are discussed in detail in Appendix G.

John Hick believes that the idea that the human self could exist endlessly is itself problematic, partly because of memory. He asks if personal identity depends on memory, then how could we remember across the timescales of the afterlife? Remembering what we did 30 years ago is difficult; how would we remember over millions of (afterlife) years? ‘Is there no limit to the memory capacity of a finite being?’ So perhaps it is better to see ourselves as ‘a series of persons merging successively into one another, so that we can speak of our former selves and our future selves.’<sup>147</sup> Such conjecture leads Hick to borrow from Buddhist conceptions of the universal *atman* to explain how successive lives have continuity without memory, but ultimately he fails to convince that this is not a matter of successive reincarnation leading to personal dissolution.<sup>148</sup> I am sure Hick is right in questioning the capacity of the present human physical mechanism of memory; but if, as Swinburne suggests, the soul itself somehow contains memory, perhaps an entirely different scale of operation can be envisaged.

### ***Reincarnation and Resurrection Confused***

Several interviewees mentioned reincarnation at an early stage, but became less certain or changed their views as they responded to the full range of questions. Bernard was clear at first that, ‘it would be such a waste of spirit or somebody’s soul if it were not used again and again and again in some way shape or form’. But after reflecting on later questions he came to realise that the afterlife, for him, must involve being able to relate to his family, so he still had to be ‘him’. Bernard was clear that with reincarnation, ‘obviously you cease to be; your soul continues but you have no conscious memory or knowledge of that.’ So he reasoned that the afterlife must be such that he would remain himself in a non-physical existence of souls, where he could be with his family. Charles explained how his view of reincarnation had changed since being a young person. ‘Years ago I had a feeling that when you died you are born again onto this earth as something else. An animal, an insect, another human being or [pause] it was

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<sup>147</sup> John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: an Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 243.

<sup>148</sup> John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976). See David Cheetham, ‘John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection’ (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 104, for discussion of the vagueness of what constitutes the continuing person, which Hick calls the ‘dispositional structures’.

immaterial what it was. It was just the fact that you were born again.’ But his views had changed because he realised that being born again would mean he would know nothing about his previous existence. ‘If I am born again what’s going to happen to me at the end? ... Reading more recently I think that’s an outlook of Buddhism.’

Reincarnation was also raised by others in a different way. Patricia thought that reincarnation might be a possibility for some, and even for Jesus if he felt the need to appear in a particular historical context again. But it was clear that it would be *Jesus* who would return: that is, he would not be somebody else. Martin, the only person with a view of the afterlife as physical (see below), nevertheless had a remarkable ‘recycling’ view of judgement, which operated via reincarnation. ‘I think there may well be some form of recycling goes on until you attain that quality that’s required before you are allowed to go on to the afterlife.’ When asked to explain further, Martin said, ‘Well, does your spirit, if you haven’t been up to scratch or up to standard in this life, is it recycled into another human being, another baby, to carry on to try and prove yourself before you are allowed to go into the afterlife?’<sup>149</sup> He clarified that in such cases the slate would be wiped clean, the old life would cease to exist and you would become a new person in your ‘recycled’ life. So people would be ‘missing’, as it were, in heaven. Those who didn’t make it the first time would go back and become someone else, for another try. The original person(s) would therefore be absent from heaven.<sup>150</sup>

Several people clearly implied that a rejection of reincarnation was the reason for denying bodily resurrection. In other words, reincarnation was understood as being alive in another body, not your original earthly body (which has been irrevocably destroyed by death). When asked if the post-mortem soul ever returns to a physical body, James replied, ‘that’s some other religion, and is reincarnation.’ Katie stated that ‘I don’t believe I come back as another person as some people think’, which seems to have meant for her that we are not resurrected. Also, one of those who initially proposed a form of reincarnation (Bernard) seemed to misunderstand this, equating it with the Christian position of

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<sup>149</sup> There are interesting parallels here with Hick’s view of repeated reincarnations, which are necessary in his view for continuing spiritual development. The vales of soul-making must continue to a point where eternal life is meaningful and possible. See *Death and Eternal Life*, *The Fifth Dimension*, and *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966). For Hick’s ‘replica’ theory, see footnote 160.

<sup>150</sup> See Tony Walter, ‘Reincarnation, Modernity and Identity,’ *Sociology* 35, no.1 (2001), 21-38, for a discussion of how ‘self’ is related to reincarnation by modern people.

resurrection. Hermione stated that if the afterlife is the same as it is now, by which she meant physical, ‘then what’s the difference in something like Buddhism, you know when you’re just coming back on another level, being re-born again? It would just be the same as that, surely, if it’s a physical form?’

This confusion is due, I suggest, to an almost complete emphasis on a non-physical afterlife and the apparent absurdity of a final physical state. Talk of ‘becoming physical again’ has moved so far from traditional Christian ideas (in their minds) that it has become associated with the non-Christian idea of reincarnation. Resurrection is a nonsensical idea for them. Calvin faced the same problem of people seeing corpses as things of temporary significance. He argued that the obvious facts of physical decomposition must not sway people away from the idea of a resurrection of *this* body, this flesh, which will be reunited with our soul.

The volatile spirits with whom I now dispute adduce the fiction of their own brain, that in the resurrection there will be a creation of new bodies. Their only reason for thinking so is, that it seems to them incredible that a dead body, long wasted by corruption, should return to its former state. Therefore, mere unbelief is the parent of their opinion. The Spirit of God, on the contrary, uniformly exhorts us in Scripture to hope for the resurrection of our flesh.<sup>151</sup>

### 3.3 ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF NON-PHYSICALITY

A range of arguments were put forward by these ordinary theologians to explain why the afterlife cannot be physical.

#### ***Dead People are ‘Empty’***

When her mother died, Yvonne felt ‘she wasn’t actually still there in the body if you see what I mean; it was just a body. ... wherever she had gone, she’d already gone.’ Felicity is clear that, ‘they’re not there anymore. The person’s not there. It’s just like a shell, ... the person has gone.’ Charles once saw an elderly neighbour who had just died, and his face was relaxed and at peace, with no worry lines like he had in life. ‘Something had left his body, ... the spirit had gone, floated away somewhere.’ Nora believes that ‘when you bury or cremate someone it is the shell, ... and the essence of the person has already gone into the

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<sup>151</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), Book 3, Chapter 25, section 8.



afterlife.’ Martin believes that a corpse is ‘just something that is left’, and that ‘in a funeral we bury something not someone’. For James, the difference between cremation and burial does not matter. ‘It’s a way of getting rid of the body which, once you’ve died, is surplus.’ Katie said it makes little difference whether we are buried or cremated because ‘it’s just bones in a box.’

### ***The Physical is the Problem***

James believes that the body and the soul are totally separate, and the body is actually what causes all our earthly problems.

Our soul doesn’t need the body. So, our soul can exist quite separately, and from that point of view it has no, emm, grudges or disputes with other souls, because it doesn’t need anything to keep it going, not like the body. So as I see it, all of our problems come because of the body. Because we need food we worry about whether the person down the road is getting more than we are. And all these sort of things affect directly our body. But once we’ve lost our body we don’t need to think about it.

Hermione believes our physicality is a temptation to sin.

I know that there’s a lot [in the Bible] that says that it is a physical form, but, there’s a part of me can’t really believe it is a physical form because there is too much about a physical form that creates sin in the first place. So to me [laughter], to me you have to not have that bit you know, ... I don’t believe that when you’re resurrected all of a sudden ... you will be perfect, ... I don’t believe that. So to me it can’t be physical in this sense of physical.

Katie also saw the physical as having this (sexual) propensity. When asked if there would be any wrongdoing in the afterlife she replied, ‘I hope so [laughter]. ... But I don’t know how that would be, because your body is not there, so I don’t know how that would happen.’

In a quite different and unusual sense, Alice believes that this earthly life is so problematic for many people that they may not actually have any personal continuity in the afterlife. Being ‘at peace’ is the key goal of heaven, and people would therefore not look back to their earthly life as this could be distressing. ‘I don’t think that what they have been matters anymore.’ I asked Alice what would then make you ‘you’ in heaven? ‘I don’t know that I need to be Alice. I just think that this contentment and peace doesn’t involve ... what I have been, what I’ve done or who I am.’<sup>152</sup> She would know somehow that her human family were

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<sup>152</sup> John Knox, ‘Can The Self Survive The Death Of Its Mind?’, *Religious Studies* 5 (1969), 85-97, argues that the self is logically independent of the mind, and therefore capable of surviving the destruction of the mind.

there, but wouldn't remember the disputes and problems. It would just be a 'spiritual home'.

### *Physicality and Death*

One of the questions I asked was 'why do we all have to die?' The answers to this usually indicated a very clear association between physicality and death; that death was a necessary part of physical existence. Duncan said it is 'simply because of the physicality of things. Just as there is a growth, life and death cycle to everything [pause], animals, plants, the earth. That's just the way it is.' He then went on to relate, in humorous fashion, that if none of us died then families would be huge and horrendous; just imagine all that emotional baggage, and all those people telling you what to do. A very common response to this question was to say that we must die to make room for subsequent generations. In other words, the birth of new people was of overriding importance compared to the extension of our own lives. For Ursula, death is necessary 'because we're not perfect and life isn't perfect. But also perhaps [pause], because there should always be room for something new or different, or things to change and evolve; and if nobody ever died perhaps that would never happen.' Vera commented that 'we have to have a beginning and an end.'

There was also identification of necessary experience. Hermione suggested that ageing and dying are important in some way; that we *need* to go through it. Laura said we all die, 'because we wear out or have accidents, and perhaps that is part of the development and learning process: that you're not a static person throughout your life.' Nora said that if we went on forever then there would never be any sense of maturity. Our whole earthly life is based on it coming to an end, and 'we know that the next part of our life will be the afterlife'. This is our physical time on earth, our bodily time, and 'after we die then heaven will be the place that our soul will go to. ... That is the next stage of our life.' Alice believes we need to be able to go to heaven because our final fulfilment can't happen on earth.

### *Physical Suffering will Cease*

One of the clearest benefits of the afterlife is that the sufferings of this physical world will cease. Gregory thinks that 'sometimes death is a physical

release to some people.’ This does not mean that a new kind of non-suffering physicality will be created; rather it means that physicality, which is so clearly linked with suffering, will cease. Vera stresses that the afterlife provides a rest from the physical problems of this world. She associates this especially with the later stages of human life, and death. ‘They’ve had a struggle, ... a struggle to live, and they can relax when they’ve died, because the body is gone now.’ When asked if there will be any suffering in the afterlife, Hermione replied:

Well that’s the whole point of it. I mean, again, if all you’re doing is being reborn into the same sort of existence then you will go through exactly the same kind of pain and suffering [pause] because of that physical form. And then to me, I don’t see the point of putting people through that again.<sup>153</sup>

### ***Practical Issues For a Physical Afterlife***

#### *Space and Other Resources*

James thought that because souls ‘need no sustenance, many trillions of souls can all exist in heaven.’ For Katie, this would be problematic for any physical afterlife.

Because if you think about it physically, you would be thinking, well, who does the cooking, you know. So that’s why it cannot be, not for all the millions and trillions and billions of people that have died. I mean I know it’s a marvellous picture [laughter] but I mean physically, in a physical form, that cannot be, I don’t believe.

Imogen pointed out that death in this life is necessary so that we don’t run out of space, so any physical afterlife would have this same problem.<sup>154</sup> Jacob was very sceptical of any physical afterlife, because where would all those generations of people live? He commented that it was bad enough in his house already! Bernard also saw physical space as a key issue; we could not simply have more and more physical beings living forever. By contrast, he thought souls would have no

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<sup>153</sup> Hick fails to understand, I suggest, the very strong sense in which people look forward to heaven as a ‘rest’, an end to the struggles, problems and conflicts of this physical life. The thought of further multiple instances of this sort of life would perhaps be a hellish vision to many of my interviewees; although Hick of course does not envisage conscious awareness of the succession of lives (see his article ‘Reincarnation and the Meaning of Life’ on his official website: [http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=54:rein&catid=37:articles&Itemid=58](http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=54:rein&catid=37:articles&Itemid=58)).

<sup>154</sup> This and other problems caused by having physical bodies in a resurrected world are pointed out by Paul and Linda Badham *Immortality or Extinction*, 5-6 and Paul Badham *Christian Beliefs*, 74-84. Hick’s response to this physical space issue is that resurrected physical lives would be lived in other parts of this vast universe, or perhaps in other space-times (see *Death and Eternal Life*, 285 and *The Fifth Dimension*, 245).

spatial location or extension, so the non-physical afterlife has no problem in this respect.

Martin, the only one who had some real sympathy with the idea of a physical afterlife (because of activities he enjoys in this life), nevertheless had real concerns about resources and organisation.

I don't quite take this idea that at the last trump all shall be raised. ... I just can't imagine that happening. To me that's, [pause] way out of this world. It's something my mind won't take in. When you think of the millions and millions of people who would be raised in that event.

Furthermore, if Jesus eating fish with his disciples after his resurrection means that in the afterlife we all need to eat, then 'you've got to have quite a big organisation to provide food and clothing for all these millions who are going to be raised just like that [snapped fingers]. My mind won't encompass that happening.'

### *Relationships and Meeting Others*

James thinks that because you have no body in the afterlife, then relationships would be different. The relationship with one's wife, for example, could not be the same without a physical aspect. But, there would be no need in the afterlife to rely on one person in particular. For James, a soul existence allows us to meet many other people, free of the limits of physicality. 'You could meet anybody, ... you would be without a body so you could mix with any number of millions of people, and pick out someone you wanted to meet.' This in fact allows us to have a more fulfilling afterlife, because we can meet so many people.

A common issue was the question of how one could return to a relationship after a significant amount of time had passed. Surely one would have become a different person to the one known by those who are now in the afterlife? This is the issue which Allan focused on, and resolved, in his individual afterlife solution (see 'Individual Heavens – A Remarkable Solution' page 55). Felicity wondered how relationships could be the same. 'It would be different, we would be different ages wouldn't we?' In the group meeting Martin raised some of the logical problems that emerge if we believe we will meet people we knew and loved in the afterlife; for example, what age will they be when we meet them in heaven? Ursula added, how would a baby who died recognise her mother in the afterlife who had later died as a 90-year-old? Claire said, 'I don't picture it like that

because that's almost like an extension of earth.' Felicity then asked if that was what most people felt, that they would meet up with loved ones? Olive replied 'That's what keeps me going.'

### *Decay and Ageing*

There is, I believe, a very clear and common experience of ageing which directly influences how the afterlife is conceived by these ordinary theologians. My congregation, like most others, contains many elderly people. The caring professions are also well represented, with a significant number who have seen the physical reality of death and dying at first hand. Their experience of the physical is that age brings problems as health deteriorates. To underestimate this common experience is to overlook a key reason why a vision of the afterlife as a return to a form of physical existence (resurrection) is entirely counter-intuitive for many people. I would suggest this perspective is actually increasing in a society which is getting older. The Department of Work and Pensions recently published figures which show the rate of ageing of our society. More than 10 million people in the UK (17% of the UK's 62 million residents), are expected to live to be more than 100. The DWP projects that by 2080, there could be 626,900 people in the UK aged 100 or more; 21,000 of those would be at least 110. This is more than 53 times greater than the current number of centenarians (11,800). At present there are fewer than 100 people who are older than 110. The number of people aged over 100 is expected to nearly double between 2030 and 2035, when it is projected there will be 97,300 centenarians in the UK.<sup>155</sup>

Many news media presented this as an unequivocally good news story, but it is my experience that the elderly feel differently, wondering how many of their final years will be blighted by ill-health and significant decline. Surprisingly little is actually known about the health of the elderly in the final years of their lives. An innovative study currently being undertaken by the Institute for Ageing and Health at Newcastle University is seeking to address this, by studying in detail the health trajectories of a large cohort of 85-year-olds. Initial baseline findings are salutary. These elderly people think of themselves as being generally in better health than others of their age, although this is perhaps more to do with how they

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<sup>155</sup> Guardian newspaper report 30 December 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/dec/30/one-in-six-people-live-100> (10 January 2011).

felt they should respond to the question rather than the actual state of their health. The alternative would be to admit that you are succumbing to old age, becoming weak, failing. Who would want to say that? In any case, the actual baseline findings show ‘significant levels of disease and impairment’, and ‘hypertension, ischemic heart disease, atrial fibrillation, depression, and dementia may be under diagnosed.’ High levels of hypertension (57%), osteoarthritis (52%), and hearing impairment (60%) were found. Also 21% had severe or profound urinary incontinence, 12% had cognitive impairment, 7% had dementia, and 7% were depressed. This suggests that the majority of these 85 year olds are actually coping with significant and long-term health problems.<sup>156</sup> The issue for older people is not which wonderful activities they will be able to enjoy in their extra retirement time, but rather whether they will be physically capable of enjoying much in the way of activity at all. They do not want to escape the physical because they are Platonists, but because they are human; because they have already lived a physical life and know what that entails.

### ***Which Physical Afterlife World?***

One further matter which needs to be raised is to consider what a future physical ‘new earth’ could be like. *I* hope that it would strongly resemble Wensleydale: I have never felt attracted to other physical environments such as that of a desert or a tropical rain forest. I do not like being hot, and I certainly do not like being hot in a humid climate. No doubt those who do think of the rain forest as a beautiful physical environment would have their doubts about the rolling dales of Yorkshire. The fell-walking legend, Alfred Wainwright, commented in a Radio 4 documentary on his life that ‘I hope, if I do go to heaven, that it’s like the Lake District. Somehow this world’s been created, and I think it’s a wonderful world.’ He then went on to express a further personal preference, that ‘it would be even more wonderful without a lot of the people who are in it.’<sup>157</sup> Many, including myself, could not easily conceive of an afterlife without large open spaces, and the possibility of solitude. The issue is not just a human one. If

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<sup>156</sup> Joanna Collerton *et al.*, ‘Health and Disease in 85-year- olds: Baseline Findings from the Newcastle 85+ Cohort Study’ *BMJ* 2009; 339:b4904 (22 December 2009) <http://www.bmj.com/content/339/bmj.b4904.full> (8 January 2011).

<sup>157</sup> ‘The Man Behind the Mountains’, October 2010, Radio 4.

all physical creatures were to be resurrected, as some think,<sup>158</sup> then what physical earthly environment would be replicated: one that suited dinosaurs, or trilobites, or us?

The question of what sort of world it would be is even more of an issue when one considers the vast cultural and social differences over time. I am really very different indeed from a ninth-century man who lived in what is now County Durham. Such a person would have lived a staggeringly different life to mine, and one that was probably much shorter. His life would have been filled with concerns, discomforts, and problems that I could not comprehend; and he would struggle to begin to understand the luxury, technology, and wealth at my disposal. Who would be the most surprised, I wonder, at a general resurrection into the same physical world? How far do we go back in terms of our biological predecessors? Are there Neanderthals in the physical afterlife? If so, surely their physical heaven must be different from mine? What about our successors: surely if the human species survives long enough then our future progeny could be very different indeed to what we currently understand as ‘human’?<sup>159</sup>

The more one stresses the role of the physical for our human being, the more one faces practical difficulties with a renewed physical existence. The point is that it is hard to see what a ‘new earth’ would actually be like. In fact, it is as difficult to envisage a renewed physical environment which would be ‘heavenly’ for all, as it is to imagine a more spiritual concept of the afterlife. The point is further emphasised when one considers that the new physical world of N.T.Wright, the ‘life after LAD’ (see Appendix D), will also apparently be one where the second law of thermodynamics (entropy) no longer applies; where illness, tiredness, earthquake and famine will vanish; where evolution will stop and competition, predation, and greed will be a thing of the past.<sup>160</sup> Such a world is so far from our

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<sup>158</sup> See Christopher Southgate’s ‘pelican heaven’ argument in his *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 78-91. Southgate recognises the difficulties in thinking what kind of heaven this could be, for example with regard to predator animals, but argues that such problems should not deny the after-death existence of non-human creatures.

<sup>159</sup> Or has evolution effectively been brought to an end by human society? We deliberately do not allow natural selection to operate unbridled, and the long-term effects of this are as yet unclear.

<sup>160</sup> John Hick produced a now famous thought experiment concerning a God-made post mortem ‘replica’ to defend the logical possibility of physical resurrection (*Death and Eternal Life*, 285). Such a ‘replica’ is different from the possible many replicas which could be made, because we trust God would make only one (*Death and Eternal Life*, 290-95) as the vehicle of continuing personal identity via continuing memory (any physical continuity of matter is nonsensical given our changing molecular constitution during life). However, Hick himself does not believe in this view and recognises the fatal

experience of this world, that it is as fantastic as a spiritual-soul world. The same point may be made if we consider the impossibly complicated social and political problems of this world, where war, environmental destruction, and injustice in all its forms, are endemic. How will this all suddenly change in another physical world? As Gregory forthrightly argued,

If we're all physically resurrected and meet each other, physically, ... it would be chaos, it would be awful in some cases. You know, this is not paradise; it would almost be a form of hell in a way. So no, that doesn't fit in with a Christian belief in life after death at all to me. ... I could think of families that have split up, or people that hate each other, or somebody who had done murder, or anything, and suddenly you're all here again. And ... what age are you? If this is going to happen, what age do you come back as, and what age are your grandparents then? It's all, [pause] it's a ridiculous notion to put all together, I can't conceive it happening. I mean is the world going to sort of come back as it is now, or 50 years ago? Are we all going to be separated by the same number of years from parents and children? The whole thing is just chaotic, the idea bears no sense. I can't see it. It doesn't sound like paradise.

Wright and others do emphasise that the new physical existence will be a transformed existence; they cannot be accused of suggesting simply more of the same. Thus, in discussing the question of 'marriage and resurrection' in Mark's gospel (12:18-27), Wright says that we will be like angels in heaven only in the sense of being unmarried, and not in the sense of being disembodied beings in heaven (as popular, mistaken imagination implies). But he goes on to say that the second important point Jesus makes in this parable is that

Resurrection ... will not simply reproduce every aspect of our present humanity. It will be a recognisable and re-embodied human existence; but a great change will have taken place as well, whose precise nature we can at present only guess at.<sup>161</sup>

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flaw which requires God miraculously to change the 'replica' so that it does not immediately die again (see the remarkably candid interviews which he gives to 'Cumbria and Lancashire Education Online' - [http://www.cleo.net.uk/resources/displayframe.php?src=937/consultants\\_resources/re/jhrt/jhrt.html](http://www.cleo.net.uk/resources/displayframe.php?src=937/consultants_resources/re/jhrt/jhrt.html)). Hick suggests a final human state which may actually be non-personal and non-physical, a 'plurality of personal centres' which 'will have ceased to be mutually exclusive and will have become mutually inclusive and open to one another in a richly complex shared consciousness.' (*Death and Eternal Life*, 460; cf. *The Fifth Dimension*, 247). Hick first put forward his replica theory in 'Theology and Verification', *Theology Today* 17, no.1 (1960), 12-31. Here he argues again for eschatological verification, which leads to the issue of how we can survive death. He produces his 'replica' idea to show that resurrection in replica bodies of different matter with continuity of memory is neither self-contradictory nor meaningless. However, in order for this to verify theism the resurrection experience must contain both the experience of fulfilment of God's purpose for us (a Christ-demonstrated quality of life) and communion with him as he has revealed himself in Christ (so our resurrection world cannot be perceived as a natural state of affairs). This article is more Christian-focused than much of his later work, where he utilises concepts of reincarnation from other religions and drops the notion of continuity of memory.

<sup>161</sup> Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2001), 168.



The question is, how great a change will it actually be? At what point does the degree of transformation actually move us away from any meaningful sense of a renewed *physical* existence, a new *earth*?

### ***Physical Characteristics in the Non-Physical***

Only one person saw some benefit in a physical afterlife (Martin); while one other suggested that, although it would be essentially spiritual, it must also be physical to some extent (Ursula). For everyone else, there was an absolutely clear and consistent conviction that the afterlife was, and could only be, a spiritual or soul existence.

The one 'physical' afterlife view, from Martin, was based on the hope that we will be able to repeat the enjoyable experiences of this life, such as sport. He thought of such physical earthly experience as an essential constituent part of what made him 'him'. 'I think the afterlife must have a large measure of what you've had on this earth.' However, he was aware of the apparent difficulty that the disciples had in recognising the resurrected Jesus (he pointed to the Emmaus Road story and the resurrection stories in Mark's gospel). So he argued that we would be physical but not exactly the same, and not at the age we were when we died. The new body that we are given is not this earthly body. This is clear, for example, with First World War soldiers who were quite literally blown to pieces.

Martin also went on to say that he agreed with 'the Platonic view that the body is a shell which the immortal soul happens to inhabit'. It is remarkable that the only person interviewed who favoured a form of physical afterlife, also believes in an immortal soul that inhabits bodies (both the earthly body, which is discarded as the empty shell at death, and, presumably, a second physical body which is given at some point after death). What this shows, together with the practical issues which Martin raised, is that the most physical view of the afterlife recorded in this project actually incorporates many non-physical characteristics. However, the same is also true of the non-physical views held by the vast majority of interviewees, which actually show significant physical characteristics.

Many of the benefits of the earthly physical life were still seen as both desirable and possible in a non-physical afterlife. James would expect to talk to Beethoven, for example, about his music, and to *listen* to music. He was fully aware of the paradox that a soul presumably does not have ears, but it was quite

clear to him that this was possible. 'I do feel that the soul could experience a lovely piece of music, a lovely painting. Yes. It's difficult but I do feel that. I don't know exactly how because it doesn't have ears.' This is an important issue. It is not a logical argument but is sincerely felt: there is a clear sense in which *it doesn't all have to fit together*, it can be partial and non-systematic. In fact, for a number of interviewees there were points where the logic of their spiritual-soul view seemed to be contradicted by a clear element of physical expression in heaven. But this was no real problem for them; they just accepted, or chose simply to ignore, the apparent contradiction. Yvonne, for example, did not want to be bored in heaven, and so hoped she would have something to do; by which she meant in a physical way looking after things or people. I pointed this out to her, and she recognised the point. But this only led her to think of the spiritual life as somehow needing a kind of bodily expression. Duncan puts the paradox in these terms.

I tend to think of it [the afterlife] as more of a spiritual existence. ... I often sort of think of them ... as physical beings, and in that sense you sort of give them [pause] that gives it some sort of physical credence. But [pause] I can't really believe that people exist in a physical existence as we would know it. ... But obviously when you think of people you think of them physically, [pause] but that's a construct of your own mind isn't it?

In answering a question about whether relationships will be maintained, Joselyn expects 'to meet up with people who have left before me at some point'. When asked how her grandmother would recognise her (never having seen Joselyn as anything other than a child), she answered that 'She'll just see me as me. She'll know that I'm Joselyn, and I'll know she's my Gran.' Another example of how all things cannot, and need not be explained. Jacob argued that with people he had been close enough to on earth, 'emotionally and spiritually', in the afterlife he would 'be able to recognise [them] even if, you know, the physical presence wasn't there'.

Katie realised the tension between spiritual and physical existence when considering how people would meet in the afterlife. She had seen reunion in heaven as the film *Titanic* showed it: when the old lady (a *Titanic* survivor) dies, she ends up back in the ship ballroom as the young woman, with her lost love (and *Titanic* victim). 'But they're all there physically aren't they? You can see all the bodies. And yet I said to you before that I didn't believe that people would ... recognise them physically. And yet when I watched that film I did.' Laura said,

I suppose I tend to think of it more as a spiritual existence with possibly some kind of physical manifestation but not necessarily looking or having a solid body as we do now. Because what age would you be? Would you revert to youth, or would you look like when you died? So I think of some kind of physical form but it's a bit insubstantial, and not terribly well defined.

But she was clear that individuals would be recognisable, not least because the soul is 'a separate entity from the physical body we have now, but in some kind of recognisable shape (laughter) [pause]. As opposed to a kind of, you know, bit of cloud or vapour, or ectoplasm.' So for Laura, the soul would be recognisable as 'you'.

Claire realised that in the afterlife people would want to continue to be able to enjoy some of the things they had in this life, which led her at least partially down the line of Allan's individual heavens. 'I picture sort of people's heavens being different in a way, because what's heaven for you, didn't somebody say, could be hell for me.' She pictures initially 'being at peace and very joyous', but then 'being able to do things that I want to do, that I love doing. So ... you see, yes, I think ... heaven is going to be different for different people. Quite how that all connects I don't know. ... is that a very earthly impression of me doing my knitting and sewing in heaven [laughter]?' I asked her how she would enjoy sewing in heaven if she was not in a physical form. 'That's easy, I couldn't could I? Hmmm. These are hard questions [laughter].' But again, there was no real problem in realising the contradiction. Patricia was clear that in the afterlife we obviously won't have physical eyes and ears, but the soul must have these abilities incorporated somehow, so that we can 'see' and 'hear' others and meet with them: a bit like heightened perceptions.

### *Non-systematic and Practical Faith*

It is important to recognise that systematic theology is not an organising principle for ordinary theologians. Faith can, should, and in fact does have a very significant non-cerebral component: non-propositional theology is important and valid. D. J. Davies contrasts 'scholarly systematization of belief with what ordinary people experience in clustered bits and pieces'.<sup>162</sup> He also emphasises the importance of context: 'if we listed the beliefs held by individuals we might

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<sup>162</sup> Douglas J. Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 19.

well find that they form an odd collection when viewed critically, but within the context of that person's own life history and contemporary life-circumstance they find their natural home and work well.'<sup>163</sup> It is certainly my experience that ordinary Christians can hold together quite happily views on various aspects of theology which in systematic terms would appear contradictory. Duncan Forrester claims that 'Theology ... is not some great theory of everything to which believers are expected to give their consent.' Rather, 'we live with and by fragments of truth and insight, making a variety of patterns, and offering important, disturbing and challenging glimpses of illumination, guidance, encouragement and hope.'<sup>164</sup> Astley claims that the important thing for a Christian believer is to 'produce a theology that they can believe in and live by, in their own context and their own times. No one can do that sort of theology for you.'<sup>165</sup>

Nearly all of these ordinary theologians have a non-physical view of the afterlife, but this is not a 'pure' concept. There is also a clear desire to have certain elements of continuity with this life that can only be expressed in physical ways. Thus, we will be able to 'see' other people, to 'hear' music, to sew and read. Of course, in one sense this means simply that it is impossible to conjecture an absolutely different form of existence without using our present concepts, experience and knowledge. However, it also suggests that the contrast between the physical afterlife proposed by Tom Wright, and the non-physical afterlife expounded by these (and, according to survey data, many other<sup>166</sup>) ordinary theologians, is not as complete as it may at first appear. Continuity and discontinuity between this life and the next means, inevitably, *a spectrum of physicality within the non-physical*. Or, from Wright's perspective, *a spectrum of non-physicality within the physical*. It is not simply one or the other.

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<sup>163</sup> Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* (London: Continuum, 2nd ed., 2002), 168.

<sup>164</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *Theological Fragments: Explorations in Unsystematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 1.

<sup>165</sup> Jeff Astley, *SCM Study Guide to Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 2010), 8.

<sup>166</sup> See Appendix A.

### 3.4 FURTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AFTERLIFE

In their social and cultural history of heaven, McDannell and Lang show that two major images have dominated: the theocentric (solitary beatific experience of God) and the anthropocentric (a social world of reunion with others). These two views are present throughout Christian history, becoming stronger and weaker as cultural and social factors determine. They exist together, but one never totally dominates or eliminates the other. Both are necessary within the tradition; the pendulum swings back if one is over-emphasised at the expense of the other. ‘A basic tension occurs at the heart of Christian mentality – a tension foreshadowed in its founder’s injunction to love both God and neighbour.’<sup>167</sup> It is clear that these ordinary theologians are primarily anthropocentric in their views of the afterlife.

#### *A Social Afterlife – The Anthropocentric View*

Nearly everyone interviewed conceived of the afterlife as a social environment, with the majority seeing this as re-union of family and friends. Imogen, for example, said, ‘I would hope very much that I would meet up with my father and most of my relatives again. Not necessarily all of them, but I would certainly like to meet up with a number of friends who have been helpful, if for no other reason than just to say thank you.’

However, two people gave an alternative view. Gregory had ‘never thought about a collective existence. ... I’ve just thought about individuals in their compartments and not really coming together with anybody else.’ Hermione can’t see how a social but spiritual afterlife can work. ‘I mean if you’re not in a physical form I can’t sort of envisage that you’ve got little blobs floating around, you know, recognising each other in the same way.’ She would like to think that you would meet up with people in the afterlife, but is not totally convinced that you’d be able to recognise other non-physical beings.

The majority social view itself had two variations. Most thought that you would meet the same people in the afterlife that you had known on earth, and that those earthly relationships would be resumed. However, some thought that one’s earthly relationships would not necessarily obtain. Patricia suggested that perhaps one could choose whether or not to maintain a particular relationship. Ursula and

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<sup>167</sup> McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 357.

Laura believe that the nature of relationships in the afterlife would be so much better than on earth that special one-to-one relationships such as husband and wife would no longer be necessary; the same quality of relationship would be available to all. In the group meeting, Martin introduced the matter of his grandfather who had had three wives and who certainly did not want to look after them all in the afterlife. Ursula commented that ‘I don’t think you’ll be married in heaven.’ She continued that, if in heaven, ‘I meet Martin and I meet [husband] I will love them equally, and ... they will love me equally.’

Both these views (and the idea of family reunion in general) appear to be based on the same premise: that high quality human relationships, which are most especially glimpsed on earth in good family relationships, will be continued in the afterlife. One viewpoint sees these relationships as being so important that they will be replicated with the same people in the afterlife; the other viewpoint sees them as being so important that all relationships in heaven will be like this. Also, of course, a person adopting the second viewpoint might be inclined to do so either because they want a less than satisfactory earthly relationship to be replaced, or because they want a wonderful earthly relationship to be expanded. This view of relationships is also a reasonable interpretation of Mark 12:8-27 and parallels, the question about marriage and the afterlife.

### *Perhaps not with Everybody*

Several people raised the relationships problem that Allan resolved with his individual heavens. Hermione asked, ‘what if you met somebody [in heaven] you didn’t like, who had done something wrong to you in the previous existence?’ Even if this person had repented, Hermione still doubted she would like to resume such a relationship. Yvonne wondered how you could possibly want to meet a murderer, for example. Katie also was sure that you couldn’t just meet everybody in the afterlife. ‘No, in my mind, just the people I would want to meet.’ Patricia thought she ‘will be able to know who the loved ones I want to be with are, and I won’t be with those that don’t want to be with me and I don’t want to be with them.’

This was actually the key issue for Alice in eventually arriving at her overall view of the afterlife.

You think, well, how can heaven be so fantastic if people are going to be arguing with one another, and husbands and ex-wives meeting up. ... It can't be like that, it must be peaceful, and somewhere where you really want to go. I'm sure people must think, 'Oh, I don't want to go to heaven if I have to see him again'. So it can't be like that, because if you think of abused children and abusive parents, there's no way that heaven can be like that at all.<sup>168</sup>

### *Vaguely Theocentric – The Possible Presence of God*

The interviewees were asked whether they would meet God and/or Jesus in the afterlife. A few were clear that they would. Nora saw this view as an essential part of being a Christian; God has to be part of the afterlife, 'overlooking' it. Imogen and Ursula were also sure of meeting God in the afterlife, and Jacob said, 'It would be nice to think that either or both would be there.' In the group meeting, Ursula commented that 'surely as Christians it [the afterlife] must be about meeting God?'

However, some people doubted that God or Jesus would, or even should, be present. Allan gave a logical, if extraordinary, reason for thinking this.

If we did ever meet them there wouldn't be anybody to believe in anymore, because we would already know them in a personal sense. And if we did meet them there wouldn't be any more ultimate questions; there wouldn't be anything to search for.

For Allan, the afterlife would become boring if we found God there. He sees a continuing need, beyond death, to seek and strive to understand. Meeting God would actually be a bit of a let-down really, leaving us with nothing else to do or believe in. 'The ultimate being wouldn't be ultimate anymore.'

Janet does not believe God or Jesus will be in the afterlife, because 'I think of them as somewhere else again. ... I've never sort of put the two of them in the same place.' What she seems to mean by this is that the afterlife is actually a human place, and that God would be somewhere else, or perhaps everywhere in a more general sense. Others also thought that God and Jesus would be there, but that, rather than a direct meeting, there would simply be a general awareness of God. Gregory believes that God must be present, 'otherwise the whole thing's a

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<sup>168</sup> One might think here of the famous complaint against human cruelty, particularly involving children, by Ivan Karamazov; a nonsensical cruelty which cannot be explained or made good by a future heaven. Ivan therefore returns his 'ticket' to the afterlife: it is not worth it if the suffering of even one child is required. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 287-8. However, as shown below, theodicy was not an important issue for these ordinary theologians.

bit pointless I think'; but he was unsure about any direct meeting. Irene 'would say God's presence is there' and that people will be aware of this. Alice also believes that we will feel their presence spiritually, but wouldn't meet them face to face. Claire imagines it, 'more as ... sort of a being at oneness rather than ... as sort of me meeting you'.

Duncan presents a very interesting argument against the theocentric view. 'The older I get the more I feel that God is here now, and it's more of a continuum.' He then made it very clear that, in his opinion, this life must not be seen simply as waiting to meet with God in the afterlife. In other words, the future promise of beatific vision must not distract us from the value and wonder of this present life, which is also lived in the presence of God.

Several people raised practical issues in relation to the idea of meeting God, many of them physical in nature despite their non-physical conception of the afterlife. Yvonne stated that God 'must be a very busy person. I mean, there's millions of people, so how does he see them all at once. Do you have to queue up? [laughter]' Martin said, 'I think it is unlikely that we'll meet Jesus in that form, in the form of Jesus, because there is such a vast area and large number of people to look after or see to.' He would be there, but we wouldn't meet him; he would be too busy, like the Queen.

For others, the problem was how we could be important enough to warrant an actual meeting. Joselyn thought 'they might be there but, ... I'm just a real speck of dust, ... I don't think I've done anything so spectacular in my life that they would want to meet me.' In similar vein, Katie asks 'why would he [Jesus] just want to meet me, you know, when there are so many other deserving souls?'

In the preface to the second edition, McDannell and Lang report that a key reaction of readers to their book, which many have shared with the authors, has been an expectation that they will meet their loved ones again. They contrast this with what they see as a continued public scepticism of theologians on this matter. They believe theologians generally criticise the anthropological heaven and maintain a more abstract theocentric heaven.

We, however, believe it is the theologians that are naïve. It is the anthropocentric view of heaven that has been the most widely articulated perspective. The expectation of being reunited with family and friends in heaven is so prevalent throughout Christian history that it is not surprising that contemporaries see it as the "natural" notion of life everlasting. ... That one meets family and friends after death requires, for most people,



no explanation. What does need to be accounted for, what needs argument and explanation, is precisely the “professional’s heaven,” the theocentric notion. It is the heaven of the eternal contemplation of God that requires more ink to be spilled, more biblical passages to be cited, and more elaborate descriptions to be drawn.<sup>169</sup>

The ordinary eschatology disclosed in this project is primarily anthropocentric. There was remarkably little expectation of the beatific vision.

### ***Judgement or Not?***

The interviewees were asked whether they thought everyone experiences the same afterlife, and whether there is any form of judgement or punishment in the afterlife. A wide range of responses were received, ranging from the majority universalist view (all will be ‘saved’ because God loves us too much for it to be otherwise),<sup>170</sup> to a minority view of a real objective judgement for the worst of earthly actions (because God could not allow such people to taint the wonderful afterlife).<sup>171</sup>

The most popular response was that there is no judgement: the same afterlife is the destiny of all, irrespective of moral or religious background (universalism). The usual reasoning for this was the idea of God as essentially loving.<sup>172</sup> For example, Nora said, ‘I do believe he’s a kind God, he’s a loving God. And I do believe that’s the difference maybe between the New Testament and the Old Testament. The afterlife is for everybody. There is no judgement, no.’ Gregory

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<sup>169</sup> McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, xiii-iv.

<sup>170</sup> Universalism is the belief that all humankind will ultimately be saved, and may be traced back to the *apocatastasis* argument of Origen – see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A & C Black, 5<sup>th</sup> revised ed. 1980), 473-4. This view appears to have been condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople in 543, but some confusion remains – see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11306b.htm> on the ‘Second Origenistic Crisis’. Richard Bauckham, ‘Universalism: A History’, *Themelios* 4.2 (1978), 47-54, shows that the non-universalist Augustinian view predominated until a major change after 1800. Schleiermacher reintroduced the idea of universalism (universal election) in modern theology, and Bauckham points to Robinson and Hick as the most notable contemporary proponents. John A.T. Robinson, *In the End, God* (London: Collins, 1968) argues that universal salvation is God’s perspective, but from our existential perspective the biblical myth of heaven and hell still does, and should have, real influence. This is echoed by Lesslie Newbigin in his view of a corporate notion of salvation: that the elect are not the saved, but those who have the responsibility in this world to announce and demonstrate God’s salvific intent for all. However, we need both a ‘Godly confidence’ and a ‘Godly fear’ – *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 80-88.

<sup>171</sup> Some form of ‘separationism’ is the alternative to universalism: the idea that some are separated off because of their actions or inactions and treated differently. The traditional form of this involves hell. ‘Annihilationism’ is one way in which the traditional idea of judgement has been ameliorated for modern consumption: annihilation of a person instead of never-ending torment is seen as a more acceptable action by God. It is sometimes known as ‘conditional immortality’: immortality is not a human property but is the gift of God, conditional on certain criteria being fulfilled.

<sup>172</sup> A similar argument is put forward by Wiles to justify the likelihood of life after death itself – see above page 48.

said, ‘if it happens [the afterlife] to one, it happens to all.’ Grace is sure that all will be in heaven, the good and the bad, ‘because the Bible says God forgives all the wrongs that people have done.’ Alice was clear that hell and ‘limbo’ were impossible, even though these were ideas that she was brought up with. ‘I just don’t believe a loving God would do that to you. ... I just don’t think it’s possible.’<sup>173</sup>

James does not think that someone would be deprived of their soul because they haven’t had a Christian upbringing. The benefit for James of having lived a faithful or good life is that in heaven you will enjoy better the attitude of other souls toward you. Yvonne also was clear that heaven is for all. ‘Seems a bit of a lottery, [if] only certain people are introduced to Christianity and it’s only them that can go and meet God.’<sup>174</sup> However, the inevitable tension of a universalist position was highlighted by Hermione, who thought there must be some kind of judgement, because, if not, ‘then what real difference does it make whether you believe in God or you don’t believe in God?’ But Hermione is not at all certain how it could work, ‘because there are too many people in this world who never had the same opportunities to know God, in times gone by. You can’t just wipe them out just for that reason. ... But, to think that absolutely everybody gets [to the afterlife], then I don’t actually see what the point of it all was.’<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Lindsey Hall, *Swinburne’s Hell and Hick’s Universalism: Are We Free To Reject God?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) concludes that universalism is ultimately necessary because God has to make the best possible world, and this is one in which all are saved. Rather than rely on universalist passages of Scripture, or on universalist interpretations of separatist passages, Hall argues that ‘What is more important, and I suggest gives greater strength to the universalist position, is the overall message of the Bible’ (p. 203). She bases this on her perception of an ongoing process of salvation by God, showing divine patience and determination; her view that God is a God of love; and her belief that the advent of Jesus is good news for the whole world.

<sup>174</sup> It is clear to these ordinary theologians that specific and conscious knowledge of Christ is essential neither for living a good life nor for final salvation. The extent to which such people might be unconsciously influenced by Christ was unclear. See C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1987); cf. Karl Rahner, *Later Writings, Theological Investigations* 5, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966) for his views of ‘anonymous Christianity’.

<sup>175</sup> A non-universalist argument is that there must be some point to moral action, and that right action by a Christian is necessary for a favourable final judgement (Mt. 25:31-46). The universalist may argue that moral action in this world is a reward in itself: it both proclaims the Gospel and makes it visible in human society. Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, argues that we have a responsibility to show God’s love in this world, and not simply for reasons of final judgement. The issue of epistemic distance from God in this life is also relevant here: that is, the ‘hiddenness’ of God to human lives. For Hick, (*Evil and the God of Love*), this is a necessary condition of having free-will so that we can truly develop as moral creatures. See also his ‘An Irenaean Theodicy’, in Davis (ed.), *Encountering Evil*; cf. C. Robert Mesle, *John Hick’s Theodicy: A Process Humanist Critique* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1991). Lindsey Hall agrees that epistemic distance is necessary for free will, but that this is simply to allow us to develop as persons so that a real choice can be made when we meet God face to face at death. She rejects Hick’s notion that a prolonged period of successive soul-preparing lives are necessary – *Swinburne’s Hell*, 211-12.

A number of people put forward a view of self-judgement, or at least a necessary self-awareness of earthly failings. Imogen said that religion is certainly not a basis for judgement. 'I think the ones that have no religion whatsoever have the chance of knowing something different in the afterlife. I can't see God saying "sorry, you weren't one of us on earth so you don't come here."' However, there would be a kind of self-judgement. 'I think a number of things that I've done, said, or not done [pause] I would rather like to have a chance to put them right. Having learned from experience that I could have handled that better, if I'd thought a bit more about it.' Joselyn doesn't really worry about it, but just wants 'to make it. You know, I don't want to not make it.' She believes the only thing that could prevent her from making it to heaven is herself. 'I am expecting a judgement, and yet God's grace, he wouldn't do that [said with emotion].' There is no hell; it is heaven or not heaven. Not being inside heaven would be a kind of hell (looking in from the outside), but maybe, she wonders, even then one could come back in at some point? Perhaps there will be a form of judgement, but 'I don't think they're going to boil in hell or burn forever. I just think they'll know that they haven't made it, and there cannot be anything worse than that.' She thinks this judgement is not from God, but from oneself. 'I don't think God would chuck you out. I think you would prevent yourself from going in; you would be aware. And that worries me occasionally.' So for Joselyn, self-exclusion is the worst outcome of self-judgement.<sup>176</sup>

Vera thought there may well be suffering in the afterlife due to memories of bad actions. When you die, 'maybe you would suddenly see what you'd been like. And maybe that would be punishment in itself wouldn't it?' Ursula was clear that people can come to God at any point, and would not be denied. She was also clear that judgment should not be part of what the church teaches about LAD. However, 'I think for some people, when they die, they will have to understand what they did, and maybe feel sorry about it, but [pause] I think they'll be able to see a much bigger picture and to realise that ... [it] can be put right and won't matter anymore.' Laura would

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<sup>176</sup> Tom Wright (*Surprised by Hope*, 190-6) argues that the theological worm has now turned against the liberal theology of universalism, due to the recent general failure of liberal optimism in human society. A form of divine judgement is essential as the only alternative to human chaos. However, Wright argues for a new concept rather than the traditional eternal hell, or the liberal universalism, or the midway 'conditional immortality'. This new concept is effectively self-destruction, self de-humanisation to the point where one can simply exclude oneself from the God-centred future of a new heavens and earth.

prefer to believe that, ... when I die that's it. Because if I carry on, I may have some explaining to do, or justification for the things that I have done, and knowingly done wrong, and have repeatedly done wrong. ... The punishment I think is in recognising what you have done wrong, and actually your own feelings about that, ... your own self-recrimination. No it's not a very comfortable thought actually, thinking that you will carry on and have to explain yourself.

Laura thinks there might be a separate place where people go who have been judged, but this would be a place where a second chance was always available.

I don't think I believe in a kind of traditional and eternal hell [pause]; it doesn't really gel with a sort of God of love. I mean there may be some kind of reformatory that you go to for a while, until you've kind of caught up, or come to acknowledge what you perhaps were unwilling to beforehand. But I would hope or expect that there would always be the opportunity for you to, I suppose, repent, in effect and move on, even if it took a long time to do it.<sup>177</sup>

A few thought a more objective form of judgement would apply. Charles thought there was relevant evidence from ghosts: 'Somewhere their soul or spirit is being maltreated until such time as the problem gets sorted out.' Jacob thought a real judgement would apply, but only to a very specific group of people. His father was not a churchgoer, but he was a good man, so he would be all right.

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<sup>177</sup> The notion of a post-mortem preparatory period, or purgatory, is still a contentious issue. Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) chpt. 2, argues for the benefits of an interim period of preparation for entry to the full presence of God, a period that would not deny human will and responsibility, and which could transform even wasted lives. Purgatory is not set forth explicitly in Scripture, but this does not mean it can be totally dismissed if it is a reasonable inference from important truths that are clearly found there. John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 111, argues that during the (presumably very long) time in which the souls of the dead (information patterns) are held in the mind of God, 'God's love will be at work, through the respectful but powerful operation of divine grace, purifying and transforming the souls awaiting resurrection in ways that respect their integrity. Ultimately, what has been lost will be restored and what of good was never gained will be bestowed.' David Brown, 'No Heaven Without Purgatory', *Religious Studies* 21 (1985), 447-456, argues that if moral perfection (necessary for life in the presence of God) were achieved by instantaneous transformation post-mortem then we would not be the same person; so a lengthy period of transformation is required. However, Hall (*Swinburne's Hell*, 208-9) argues that we do not need moral perfection but only the desire to do God's will. The face-to-face meeting with God following death is the key transformative process, although it may necessarily be more gradual for some than others. This is directly contrary to Hick's view of a necessary pareschaton comprising a succession of many lives to facilitate continuing spiritual preparation. 'If we were faced with a limitlessly open future .... what we now know as human nature would be transformed out of existence' (*Death and Eternal Life*, 413). Wright (*Surprised by Hope*, 178-83) sees purgatory as a non-biblical mistake: there is no category distinction of Christians in heaven/paradise awaiting resurrection. Bodily death is a destruction of all that is sinful, and Paul means this *present* life to function as a purgatory. However, Carlos Eire, *A Very Brief History of Eternity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 110, argues that 'What Luther rejected as a medieval invention was actually an ancient practice.' Eire claims the idea of post-mortem purgation was widespread in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and that Augustine accepted it and promoted it. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), dates the origin of purgatory to the twelfth century; but Eire claims that Le Goff means a *locus*, a distinct place in the cosmos and that Le Goff accepts that the idea of purgation or the practice of praying for the dead can be found among early Christians (*Brief History of Eternity*, 119).

Also, there is no problem from Jacob's point of view in having a different religion; Christianity does not have the monopoly on good people. However, he draws the line very clearly at rapists or people who hurt children. The key reason for this involves his very family-centred view; he definitely would not like such people to be near his family in the afterlife. In other words, the family concern and paternal protectiveness that he displays in this life, Jacob continues into the next. He was conscious of feeling a tension about this; he thought, on the one hand, that even people like this should perhaps be given a second chance; but, on the other, he doubted that they could change and so would not want to risk them being in the afterlife. Janet echoed this perspective even more clearly, and expanded the criteria for those who would be judged. Those who have done wrong in this life will not enjoy as nice an afterlife as the rest. 'If you're a good member of society and you do the right things, you're looked after.' But if you're a bad person, 'they certainly don't go to the [nice] place I'm thinking of.' There will be something else for them, 'because if they're like that in this world then, you know, they would be like that in the afterlife - and they're not where I'm thinking of.' So undesirable people would not be allowed to spoil Janet's family-centred, wonderful afterlife.<sup>178</sup>

From the group meeting a different overall impression was gained. It was clear that this was a key question for some, but it seemed to relate more to their

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<sup>178</sup> The key point here is that, unlike classical theological defences of judgement (separatism), it is not the justice of God which is the issue, but rather the exclusive nature of a pleasant social afterlife. Tony Walter, *The Eclipse of Eternity – Religion and Death in the Modern Era* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 127, is clear that 'the romantic concept of bereavement has legitimated a particular idea of heaven as reunion.' The key development took place before secularisation; the Victorian age, the 1930's depression, and the Second World War are key. 'The more people expected to find love and health and happiness, and the more they were disappointed by the unequal distribution of health and wealth to meet such expectations, the more heaven became the happy life they did not have on earth. This is not so much a secularisation as a de-Christianisation of heaven and hell.' Walter suggests the early demise of hell in protestant churches can be explained by this. In Roman Catholic churches the whole family usually attended, but to be a protestant is to make a choice and leave others 'outside'. Hell therefore has to go, a move accelerated by the range and number of protestant denominations and the protestant denial of purgatory (which provided a redeeming intermediate phase of the afterlife). Hell lasted to the 1960s in Roman Catholic churches, but in protest churches it was finished off by the First World War; millions of British men could not have died for their country only to go to eternal punishment, and Anglican priests conducting the vast numbers of funerals did not suggest this. Roger Grainger, 'To be dead is not enough', in Peter Jupp and Tony Rogers (eds.), *Interpreting Death: Christian Theology and Pastoral Practice* (London: Cassell, 1997), 35, argues that heaven is socially necessary. 'Somehow it has to exist. No-one likes the idea of simply "dropping into nothingness".' We want to protect our loved ones, 'to hand them over to a greater love than they have known until now.' Alister McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), ch. 5, agrees with others that the key way in which heaven has been seen is as a consolation, and in particular as a reunion with family. But he suggests that this goes back to classical times, especially Cicero's *Scipio's Dream* and the idea of crossing the river Styx to the underworld.

concern for loved ones who had died rather than for their own destiny. The majority at the group meeting strongly affirmed that there would be no judgement or punishment; how could there be from a loving God? However, I suspect doubts persist for some, and that people were less willing to express these doubts in the open meeting.

### ***Active, or Not?***

What would we do in the afterlife? Responses to this question reflected not only the non-physical view of the afterlife, but also the wish of some to retain physical elements, without apparent contradiction. The key distinction was between those who wanted an active afterlife; and those who saw the afterlife as completely different to this life, and therefore wholly inactive. Nora questioned whether we would need to *do* anything, because we would be non-physical.

I think it's a spiritual being in the afterlife and I don't think they actually have to do anything. ... I don't see them living a life the way that we live on earth, no. And I don't see them changing or growing or developing because what would they then grow into? Would they then grow up again, or grow even older? That's not how I picture it at all.

Alice was perhaps the clearest in seeing a completely non-active, but entirely peaceful afterlife. We won't do anything except enjoy peace and serenity.<sup>179</sup> Interestingly, though, the analogy she gave for this was a time in the Lake District when she felt complete peace and contentment in beautiful surroundings: in other words, in a *physical* environment. Bernard thought that a physical being was obviously required before one could do things like rugby; so in the (non-physical) afterlife, such things couldn't happen. The only kinds of activity would be things like listening to music, which would be possible in the afterlife because musicians will be there and 'You would hope that all that talent doesn't die with the physical being.' How this would actually happen in a non-physical existence was not an issue for Bernard. An eternal afterlife for Bernard would not be boring; it would be happy and fulfilled, mentally and spiritually. Patricia had a view similar in some ways to the 'individual heavens' of Allan. For her, the afterlife will present

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<sup>179</sup> Paul and Linda Badham (*Immortality or Extinction?*, 61) point out that "eternal rest" is by far the most common description of the life of heaven, followed closely by allusions to endless services of Christian worship', which leads to the issue of boredom. They argue that the beatific vision is not very appropriate to most of us who are not practised in contemplation. So the traditional heaven 'is only intelligible as an ultimate goal, rather than as a life that follows on from our present existence. Hence the Christian vision of heaven has to be supplemented by speculation about what other kind of life after death might be possible.'

the opportunity to do anything one wanted, any of the things we enjoyed doing on earth. This will be achieved by our ability to recall them, not by our physical state. We won't actually have bodies, ears, and eyes; and there won't be concert halls or sports stadiums. But, we will have them in memory; so we (our soul) can 'think' a rugby match, although not actually play it.

Several others could only envisage an afterlife in which they were active, yet still apparently entirely non-physical. Imogen sees personal development as necessary in the afterlife, because this is such a key characteristic of this life (and so would be continued to the next). In the afterlife, we will live 'another totally different existence but in the same sort of way, as a journey, like this [life] is a journey.' For Imogen, this earthly life 'is the learning part for something that we can do better, or different.' She then suggested a remarkable connection with continuing earthly life: God may want us, in the afterlife, to be useful to somebody who needs help in this life, in the same way that she has been helped (in this life) by her dead father. Sadly, lots of mothers and fathers would be incapable in the afterlife of giving much help to their earthly offspring, 'because they weren't in this life'. So others will be needed to fulfil this role, and this is the activity that Imogen expects. She later clarified that this could also involve helping those in the afterlife with her. 'I can't imagine God allowing anybody to just stagnate. ... he doesn't allow us to stagnate in this one. I can't imagine him in the next one allowing us to just float around doing nothing. I would hope not anyway, I would be extremely bored.' Claire also saw the afterlife as a 'furtherance of the journey', 'another phase.' She hopes to have lots of answers there, and supposes that people will develop.<sup>180</sup>

Jacob cannot envisage an afterlife without productive work; how could we just sit about all day? We need to have some work and there has to be some kind of order; we have to be doing things and helping each other and building relationships. 'There has to be a reason, I mean there's no sense in existing with no purpose.' Of course, the physical/non-physical tension always arises in thinking of activity in the afterlife. Jacob resolved this in a way similar to the individual afterlife idea of Allan.

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<sup>180</sup> This strong emphasis by some on continuing moral and spiritual development in the afterlife suggests echoes with Hick's paretological many-lives idea. However, for these ordinary theologians, such development is desirable and possible in a single continuous existence post mortem.

I think you can think about things; you can think, if this doesn't sound too daft, you can think about things which become quite real. ... I mean there's loads of days when I think I could do this and do that and I realise how I'm going to do it.

Jacob was clear about the purpose of the afterlife. 'To give meaning to the life we've already had on earth I think. I mean if there just wasn't anything, this part of our life is quite meaningless as well, isn't it?'

Dawn, however, could think of nothing worse than a working life being continued in heaven. 'Well I'm not blooming well working I tell you that, ... but I don't want to be sitting in a green patch of grass either all the time ... because I'd get bored with that. ... I'll have a pile of books and catch up with reading or something like that (laughter).' Similarly, Vera is absolutely sure that she is not going to be doing any washing up. Life in the afterlife would be more like 'floating; a sort of being there, but not there. It would be lovely just to have conversations with people wouldn't it? I don't actually see you doing anything. I don't think it's a replica of the earth, of what we do in this world.' However, Vera also assumed (contra her non-physical view) that 'it's going to be a kind of sunny place and bright colours. But I don't really ever imagine doing anything like going to the theatre or going to do my shopping, because it's not a worldly place. But I imagine it to be a nice place.' There could be work of a kind. 'Maybe you have to help people. Well obviously if somebody is coming to collect you [at the point of death], there must be some kind of process there. Maybe you have to be involved with people in a different way. But not like "go to the office" kind of work.'

The experience of time was at least implied by those who saw an active afterlife. For some, this posed a problem. Gregory argued that 'we're not going to be in a dimension where time means the same as it does here'. Jacob also thought time might be different in heaven; a million years could be like a week, so 'forever is just like another lifetime.' Ursula believes that time wouldn't matter in the afterlife because there would no longer be earthly pressures such as money and careers, 'so inevitably people would become less anxious, calmer; but have more time to think and discover things', and to reflect on their earthly life.



### 3.5 WHAT JESUS' RESURRECTION TELLS US

So strong is the belief in a non-physical afterlife among the subjects of this study that the resurrection of Jesus is seen in a most surprising way. Only a minority of people believed that Jesus was not resurrected physically – that it was his spirit which came back and was perceived by the disciples. The majority view was that Jesus was physically resurrected. However, the remarkable thing about *both* positions is the belief that he came back for a brief period simply to prove that he had been right, to show that what he had said was true and to demonstrate that death was not the end of human life. In other words, *his physical resurrection has nothing to do with the nature of the afterlife we will experience*. He came back physically *only* because this was *the most convincing proof for us*, to show us emphatically that he was to be believed and that what he had taught was true. But after this short period of physical resurrection, he returned to a *spiritual heaven*, where we will go as *souls* or *spirits* after death for an eternal existence.

The minority response that Jesus was not physically resurrected was to be expected, in that it is implied by the soul-spirit afterlife postulated by the majority of interviewees. For example, James thought the resurrection of Jesus was the basis of our belief in an afterlife, but it was not physical. He was absolutely clear that the disciples saw 'his [Jesus'] soul', and that 'this is how his appearance would be as a spirit or a ghost.' James does not think that the issue of an empty tomb is 'too relevant really. If the body is no longer necessary then it doesn't really matter.' Even Martin, the one person who favoured physical aspects of the afterlife, did not draw any physical implications from Jesus' resurrection. When asked what it meant he said only, 'It's really that he survived death, and went on into the next life, so he could help us and guide us.'

A large majority of respondents did see Jesus' resurrection in physical terms, but then very clearly expressed that remarkable explanation of why this was so. Alice believes 'that Jesus did appear in bodily form to [pause] show his disciples and followers that he was the living God and that things that he had said and done were right. I think if he had just died people would've thought, well he could be anybody. ... He came back and he is the only one who has.' I queried why he came back in a bodily, rather than a spiritual form. 'Because they could have just said, "oh he was just any prophet". But to come back from death was truly remarkable.' I asked Alice if Jesus' resurrection might also mean that physical

resurrection would happen to all of us. ‘No, [pause] because there is no way we are going to come back like that. That was just him, and [pause] to finish off what he had been trying to teach as well.’

Claire said, ‘I think if he [Jesus] had just died, the disciples at the time, the people at the time, would have thought, well, he’s just died, that’s it, he’s gone. So he almost came back to underline what he’d been saying, you know, that he hadn’t died, but he’d gone on to live with his Father in heaven.’ Claire was sure that the tomb was empty; it had been a physical resurrection. She also suggested that this was so unbelievable that it was hard to accept, and maybe this is why the disciples seemed not to recognise him.

Nora thinks that the physical resurrection of Jesus has to be seen in a broader sense. When he said ‘I am the resurrection’, this pointed to the afterlife, ‘to the fact that as a physical body you can only be in one place at one time. But as a soul, ... and certainly as a spirit, Jesus was able to be dispersed, ... and able to be spread much, much wider and for infinity.’ Nora believes the tomb was empty and that he appeared ‘in a physical form for a short time before he went to heaven. To illustrate to those, to his followers, and to Christians throughout the world now, that physical death is not the end, that there is life beyond that.’

Laura thought that Jesus

did rise as, [pause] well, both soul and physical body; because the body did actually disappear and there were people who touched him. So in that sense, that is different from us going into an afterlife of soul because he was resurrected in toto. ... I think it was to demonstrate to the disciples and people he met at that time that it had happened. Because I think if you hadn’t had his physical body – if he sort of came and went like some kind of ghost – the proof, that demonstration, is much less conclusive. And afterward it could be written off as that people just saw visions, just hallucinated.

I asked Laura what happened to Jesus’ body after this proof was exhibited? ‘Well, [pause] it seems to me that he was actually almost able to make it kind of disappear again.’ Laura suggested that this is what happened in the Emmaus Road story, Jesus could ‘substantiate and de-substantiate himself’. Jesus is now in a spirit afterlife.

Hermione thought that the tomb was empty, but that the same body had not been used because, if it had, he would have been more easily recognised. The physical body, ‘if it is used then it has to be taken and transformed totally. ... but not into the same kind of physical form ... I just can’t hold with that belief’.

Hermione thinks Jesus was resurrected ‘to help people at that time to believe in something more ... I think it was done to inspire people, to [pause] maybe to prove that God was greater than man and could do these things, that there was something beyond that.’ This happened ‘just to Jesus because he was the son of God, and just for a short period of time because he wasn’t supposed to stay down here forever.’ Jesus is now in that place where we will go to after our ‘resurrection’, by which Hermione means not any physical resurrection, but the state of spiritual life that we will enjoy at the point when we are all awakened together from an interim period of soul-sleep.

In my conversation with Duncan I had to press him quite hard to explain why Jesus’ physical resurrection was different from the spiritual afterlife that he thought we would experience. This was not because he found this difficult to explain, but that he thought it was so obvious: it is what proves that Jesus is special. ‘The resurrection had to be proved to the people that were there ... that death had been conquered. ... So Jesus had to exist physically after death.’ A continuing spiritual presence would not have been enough; Jesus had to be seen. When asked if we would also be resurrected physically, Duncan replied, ‘No, it had never crossed my mind to be honest. No, I had always accepted that [Jesus’ resurrection] was a one-off.’

These examples illustrate a remarkably consistent view from the ordinary theologians in this project: a view quite at odds with the biblical teaching (1 Cor. 15:20) that Jesus’ physical resurrection was a foretaste and guarantee (first fruits) of our own final life after LAD.<sup>181</sup> I was genuinely surprised when I first heard this view expressed, but quickly realised that it was the standard opinion. It is understandable in that those who accept a non-physical afterlife must give a different meaning to the physical resurrection of Jesus. It is, however, nonetheless remarkable. It certainly raises important questions about how clergy and academic theologians are conveying their views of church doctrine and biblical interpretation, and whether such views are, or should be, accepted by ordinary Christians. It is to the ordinary theologians’ understanding of these issues that I turn next.

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<sup>181</sup> For an example of this generally accepted interpretation see C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A & C Black, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1971), 350-1.

### 3.6 LITTLE TRUST IN ACADEMY AND CHURCH

A particularly revealing set of answers were given to questions concerning the Bible and church doctrine. I asked first whether the interviewee could tell me what the Bible said about LAD. I then asked whether it would matter if biblical scholars or theologians thought something different to them. This was repeated from an ecclesiastical perspective: could they tell me what the church in general (that is, not their local church or denomination, but the wider church as they experience it) officially believes and teaches about LAD. And again, would it matter if the church view was different from theirs? Finally, I asked if church doctrine concerning LAD was as clear, clearer, or less clear than other church doctrines.

The results of these discussions were very surprising. I say this as a reflexive researcher and not, I hope, solely as the long-term minister of these people. The vast majority of those taking part in this study are mature or elderly people with a life-long church experience and commitment to the Christian faith. They include graduates; people who hold, or have held, well-respected professional positions; and people who are clearly intelligent and knowledgeable in many other areas. Yet perhaps only one person demonstrated any detailed knowledge of the Bible in relation to LAD. This is not to say that these people are simply unfamiliar with the Bible, but rather that they could not apply a general knowledge of the scriptures to a specific doctrinal issue. They also *demonstrated a deep scepticism concerning any claim to definitive biblical interpretation*, as well as a *very sceptical attitude toward official church teaching and doctrine* (which is less surprising coming from Congregationalists who, of course, value the independence of the local congregation). This area of the interview often produced the most animated discussion and the most definite opinions, and was usually one of the longest sections of the interview.

The reasons given for the scepticism of scriptural teaching were variations on a theme: that it was impossible to have a single correct claim concerning what the Bible actually says about LAD. However, the explanations given for why this situation obtains reflect a wide theological spectrum of attitudes toward the nature and use of the Bible, and provide some interesting comment on hermeneutics. Interestingly, or perhaps inevitably, the reasons given for scepticism concerning church teaching focused much more around the sense of ‘it is only their opinion’.

A 'conservative' theological attitude to the Bible was demonstrated by one person who thought that the impossibility of a single clear biblical view on LAD was due to technical problems of translation: in other words, a single truth is actually there but is hidden from our view by a lack of human skill in providing textual clarity and understanding.<sup>182</sup> Laura believes that the Bible is more important than church doctrine or tradition, and that we should go back to the 'pure original', to which we could return by accurate translation of the original languages. This text would then be definitive about such things as LAD. Laura thinks church doctrine in this area is a lot less clear than in others, 'because the church doesn't really talk about it, not publicly'.

James also thought interpretation was key, but was less clear that a single correct interpretation was possible. He would not be too concerned if presented with scholars who said that the Bible was clear, and quite different to his own views, 'because it might be that the translation has been misconstrued somewhere along the line'. James would be interested to know

what information they've got, where they got it from. I wouldn't necessarily take it that they knew exactly what they were talking about. ... you get a lot of translations of the New Testament. Words being ... translated from the Hebrew, translated from the Greek, translated from the Latin. And different people translate it in different ways. So ... it can be a bit ambiguous about what they are getting and I'd like to know more information.

James struggled to see how he could be persuaded of a church doctrine of LAD that was different to his own views, even if the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury explained it to him. He also said that the doctrine of LAD was just as clear as other church doctrines, which presumably means that the view of experts on other doctrines would be equally incapable of influencing or challenging his views.

Yvonne produced a conspiratorial perspective on why the single clear LAD view (which must be there somewhere) was still not available. Perhaps it was being obscured deliberately by controversial extra-biblical sources being hidden 'back in the Vatican somewhere'. She also conjectured that perhaps the evidence which would clarify things about LAD simply had not been found yet, but that

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<sup>182</sup> This is not a fundamentalist view of Scripture as inerrant doctrine, but rather a view which recognises that the Bible contains inspired and authoritative concepts and an historical record of God's dealings with us. In other words, the content is important but not the actual words. See David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM, 1975).

documents or other archaeological evidence might be one day. For the time being, if the church or the Bible clearly said something different from her, she would 'listen to their views and make up my own decision. ... They wouldn't be telling me what it was; they would be saying this is what they think, and I'm quite entitled to say what I think. And I might agree with them or disagree with them.'

Gregory recognised that there are competing and contradictory views within the Bible, and so argued that certain bits of Scripture should be considered definitive and authoritative. For him this meant that we can find reliable teaching only in Jesus' words, and 'whatever else there is, is speculation'. Gregory did not see in the church 'any official view different from mine: that the soul lives on or the spirit lives on.' I asked what if, for example, it was shown that 1 Cor. 15 means that when you die, you sleep until a single future physical resurrection? 'If they're all going to say we're all going to be physically resurrected at some time in the future, I think, no, I can't take that. It doesn't seem plausible, logical, or any good reason for it. I'd be very sceptical. They'd have to do a bit better than that before I started to change my mind [laughter].' I asked him to expand. He replied:

One sentence from somebody [Paul] saying this is going to happen is certainly not going to convince me. I need a lot more than that. If that was the established view I'd say, no, I'm not going to accept that, no, nonsense. ... I'd need a lot more. ... I think I'd need some words from Jesus that had been reported by various people, then, you know, I might think about it.

The lack of biblical clarity concerning LAD was explained by Joselyn in an interesting way. It is to do with revelation. Joselyn said that if biblical scholars were to say something very different from what she thinks, 'I would probably just say, well, that's how you think about it, but it isn't how I think about it, and we agree to differ.' If church doctrine contradicted her views, this would not be a problem either, and for an unusual reason. 'I think if God had wanted to teach us about life after death he would have done it.' Joselyn thinks that there is no clear teaching on LAD because God has chosen not to make it clearly known to us. She is quite happy with this, and needs to know only that 'I've gone before you to prepare a place'. She thinks that

there is a point in your life and death where you will understand these things that you don't understand now. So I don't worry about it. I know that I will be given that information, if that's the right word, at the relevant time, at a time when it's necessary for me to know.

As well as lack of clarity, there was also mention of an apparent scarcity of LAD teaching, in the Bible. Alice said, ‘I’ve looked and I find it very difficult to find anything very much.’ She referred to Jesus saying on the cross ‘today you will be with me in paradise’, and the text about looking in a glass darkly but then seeing clearly. ‘But it doesn’t really say what it’s going to be like. I haven’t found anything that says this is what is going to happen, ... apart from the New Jerusalem. But that doesn’t mean anything to you and me because we don’t know the old Jerusalem.’

The most common explanation of the impossibility of a single biblical view was that it is ultimately *all just a matter of opinion*. In other words, no one opinion can or should prevail at any one time. The interesting question then arises of which interpretation should be seen as better than others, and why?

If biblical scholars were to give a view different to Hermione’s, she would consider that to be just ‘an opinion based on something that was written.’ She said there are ‘contradictions in the Bible anyway’, so she wouldn’t just accept the scholarly view. ‘I wouldn’t go along and say “oh well, yeah, he knows more than I do, so that must be right.”’ Charles confessed, ‘I don’t study the Bible that much’ and went on to mention the ‘story of Jesus’, Abraham living to be 900, the ‘conversion of Saul to Paul’, and the ‘Revelations bit’ in funeral services. As far as the church is concerned, Charles believes that the basic belief in LAD is there, but that each denomination expresses it differently. Within the churches it is individuals who express their views. If church representatives or theologians said that his views were incorrect, ‘I think I would class it as their opinions. ... I’d listen to what they say and think about it, but not necessarily accept it.’ In any case, he was doubtful that you would ever get them all to agree about something like LAD.<sup>183</sup> The key thing for Charles, in judging views different from his, is that *it has to fit with his personal life experience* and what he already knows and understands. For Charles, this means it has to fit with his view of the supernatural, and his personal experience of an out-of-body event. These are primary for him.

Irene is comfortable with the idea that she can pick and choose from biblical texts: it is not all equally important (for her). She explained that ‘the Bible can say

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<sup>183</sup> This is an interesting critical comment on ‘academic’ theology by an ordinary theologian. As Astley points out (*Ordinary Theology*, 125), the views of ordinary theologians are perhaps no more varied than their more academic counterparts. The variety of academic views is discussed in detail in Appendix H, ‘Contrasting and Competing Interpretations’, pages 228ff.

things and I'll take them in my own way, and, sort of like the bits I believe inspire my way of life through God; but I don't believe I have to believe every last thing in the Bible.' What the church says about LAD is unclear, but Irene is

happy with it the way it is, because I think everyone is entitled and should have their own views on it. ... I'm sure my views of the afterlife will change as I sort of get more experience of people dying and see it more. So I wouldn't like it to be clearer because it would just be sort of telling you what to believe in a sense. And personally I don't like that sort of religion where you're sort of told and supposed to think what's there.

What the church teaches, according to Irene, is just somebody's own view, which becomes a rule. If different people ran the church, there would be different views and rules. 'I'd just stick to my own views from my understanding of the Bible.' In other words, Irene believes quite clearly that she has the right to form her own views, based on her own understanding of the Bible. Irene would be interested in what eminent biblical scholars could explain to her, but 'I'd like to see where they got it from within the Bible and read what they've read and see how they have interpreted it, and see how I would interpret it.'

Irene then explained more about her own method of biblical interpretation. 'You can take it very literally if you want, or you don't have to take it as literally if you want. ... I think it's very much no one has got a right or wrong interpretation, but it's right or wrong for what's best for you.' Irene went on to give a clear example of how this works. Forgiveness is something that she hears about, but it's putting ideas and words into practice that counts, not just thinking that she has got the right ideas as a Christian.<sup>184</sup> 'I don't just believe it, I feel you sort of have to do something with what you hear.' So Irene is arguing that *theological ideas have to be tested in practice*: an extraordinary example of an ordinary theologian explaining ordinary theology. She hasn't had much experience of death yet in her life, so she is not too clear on this issue. She can 'hear it', but is not sure about it yet; it hasn't been tested in her practice and experience. The key factor in her interpretation of the Bible is what is 'best for you', by which she means 'Best for your understanding and best for how you

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<sup>184</sup> The view of Irene, then, is not just a case of 'pick and choose' in the way of a consumer of theological ideas. Rather, it is more a *functional* view of scripture: the Bible is authoritative not because of its content as such, but because this content can function as the means for new personal encounter with God. Kelsey found that a wide variety of theologians adopt such a view of scripture: biblical texts are Scripture because they *do* something to the reader (*The Uses of Scripture*, 90-1).



would do things, and go about everything, and the way you would act with what you hear as well.’

One of those most knowledgeable about the Bible is Duncan, who expressed a more liberal view of Scripture. He ‘wouldn’t say that the messages are very clear’, but pointed to the verse in John about ‘many rooms’ (John 14:2), and said he had always liked ‘the Corinthians one about glass darkly’ (1 Cor. 13:12), which he sees as one of the strongest indications that there is more to life than this life. He also liked the bit at the end of Jude (v.24), ‘to present you faultless before the presence of his glory’. For Duncan, these verses make him think that the afterlife is different from this earthly life. He didn’t think the church was very clear on this issue, ‘partly because they are such difficult concepts, particularly in the times we live in now. ... I think hell is quietly sidelined.’ Duncan was not sure that the church *can* be clear in our secular society, where ‘clarity’ is often what people want to hear. Bishop Jenkins was good because his lack of clarity expressed honesty about his own doubts. ‘I’m always a bit suspicious about people who have no doubts and are clear about things.’ Duncan is not keen on dogma. ‘How can anybody, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Pope, say with any certainty what happens to us when we die. I just don’t think they can.’ Duncan thought he might be open to persuasion by theologians/scholars, but then pointed to a big problem. ‘I can’t see that ever happening because I don’t think references to life after death in the Bible are particularly clear. There are loads of things in the Bible that aren’t particularly clear, and in a way that’s perhaps the point: that they are open to interpretation.’<sup>185</sup>

Nora pointed to a clear difference between the Testaments. ‘I think the New Testament, unlike the Old Testament, does not seem to think you will be judged ... I would say mainly my belief I think is based on obviously New Testament teachings rather than on hellfire and damnation of any of the Old Testament.’ If theologians and bishops produced a doctrine that was at odds with her own view? ‘The churches do that all the time, you know, they come out with things that we don’t all believe in. ... I think I would get quite irate and get quite hot under the collar, but it wouldn’t shake my faith, no. I can’t imagine it doing that, no.’ Nora believes the big voices of the Christian church get bogged down in irrelevancies

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<sup>185</sup> Duncan was, I believe, referring to the idea that interpretation of biblical passages changes over time with changing church contexts. See above ‘Continuing Revelation’, pages 24ff., for a discussion of David Brown’s approach to continuing biblical interpretation.

such as the role of women and gay priests, and that this detracts from talking about things like LAD. She thinks the church is less clear about LAD than it is in other areas. It needs to be stronger and clearer, and more relevant for non-church people. Imogen also thought that ‘Churches can be very dogmatic about things which I consider unimportant’, by which she means topics like homosexuality or abortion. She thinks the church is clear about these, but waffles about LAD. However, even if the whole church was very clear, she wouldn’t just accept it, although she would think more about it.

Claire believes that ‘The church does say there is life after death, but ... I think it’s more of a personal thing. ... you can’t sort of say “this is heaven” and “this is what it’s going to be like”, you know, four walls, a roof, whatever.’ A lot of the Bible is ‘what humans have written over the years and interpreted. So, I don’t think ... the church as a whole can dictate that heaven is *x*, *y* and *z*. I think they can point us in the right direction and help us to think about it as an individual and as a group together.’ Claire pointed out that there are other (extra-biblical) sources of real guidance for her: for example, other people such as novelists tell us things which are true. However, she doesn’t like being told what to think, and certainly not ‘about an afterlife that none of us have gone to and come back from.’ She did not mention Jesus here. For Claire, ‘it’s very much an individual thing as to how you perhaps envisage it, how you reconcile you’re getting through this life and into the next life, and ... everybody has perhaps got a very different picture of it.’ She sees the Bible ‘as being what people have written, you know, people have tried to explain what they’ve seen, what’s happened to them over the years. [pause] So it’s not always sort of black and white. It’s people’s interpretations in the first place of what they’ve seen over the years.’<sup>186</sup>

How are we to understand this level of scepticism among these ordinary theologians concerning the authority of biblical teaching and church doctrine? I suggest there are two related influences. The first is a particular aspect of contemporary secular culture which emphasises the role of the individual in choosing what she wants to believe. The second is the failure of church and academy to convey biblical scholarship in a meaningful and constructive way.

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<sup>186</sup> There are remarkable similarities here with the advanced academic views of David Brown regarding the origin and continuing use of the Bible within the church: discussed above, see ‘Continuing Revelation’ page 24.

## *Relativism and Individualism*

Whether the secularisation paradigm of Steve Bruce provides a complete explanation,<sup>187</sup> or whether the more nuanced views of, among others, Grace Davie ('believing without belonging',<sup>188</sup> and later, 'vicarious religion'<sup>189</sup>), Callum Brown (the role of women in the swinging sixties<sup>190</sup>), or Robin Gill (competitive church building<sup>191</sup>), provide a more appropriate understanding, it is surely undeniable that formal church affiliation, and the public role of Christianity in contemporary British culture have undergone radical decline and change over recent years. To attend church and to be a practising Christian today is to do so in a society which largely ignores or even devalues such proclaimed views, and which provides numerous (and apparently equal) competing alternatives. This is a very different situation from the one that older Christians (the vast majority of my sample) remember from their early years in the church.

There is one particular aspect of the secularisation debate which I believe is relevant to the findings of this study: relativism and individualism. Bruce considers relativism to be an absolutely vital component of the secularisation thesis. What he means by relativism is the status with which we view our own ideas in relation to those of others. 'Increasingly social and cultural diversity combines with egalitarianism to undermine all claims to authoritative knowledge.' So,

it is difficult to live in a world that treats as equally valid a large number of incompatible beliefs, and that shies away from authoritative assertions, without coming to suppose that there is no one truth. ... The tolerance that is necessary for harmony in diverse egalitarian societies weakens religion ... by forcing us to live as if there were no possibility of knowing the will of God.<sup>192</sup>

This is why Bruce sees as inevitable the pattern of fractioning within the church, from sect to denomination, and from conservative to liberal theologies. However, the key point here is the way that personal views have gained in importance and standing compared to taught and received religious tradition. As Kelly puts it, part

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<sup>187</sup> Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularisation in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>188</sup> Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>189</sup> Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion* (London: Sage, 2007).

<sup>190</sup> Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>191</sup> Robin Gill, *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>192</sup> Bruce, *God is Dead*, 29.

of the postmodern condition is ‘the autonomy of the individual which is taken to mean that one carves out one’s own world of meaning.’<sup>193</sup>

What postmodernism makes legitimate is individual processing of, and reflection on, received ideas, beliefs and values in relation to our own particular story. In present day Western society, we have permission to be our own person and in relation to matters of belief to do our own theology and not simply absorb and accept what is handed on to us.<sup>194</sup>

The personal view rules: we are individual and independent meaning-makers and definitive interpreters of truth. This is not the position only of the younger participants in this project, or the more formally educated among them. It pervades the whole group. In other words, this element of our secular culture has, I suggest, influenced even those ordinary theologians with a life time of traditional church attendance and practice behind them.

However, the role of this element of secularism should not be over-stated, as shown by the fact that two axiomatic ‘Grand Statements’ of belief were made by participants in the group meeting. These were not said as invitations for discussion, or employed to seek other opinions. Rather, they were stated as self-evident and self-contained propositions.<sup>195</sup> The first is ‘God loves us’, and the second, ‘all will be well’. Alice stated that in the afterlife, ‘I just know peace and love are the most important things. I don’t even need to have any questions answered. I just believe that is what is going to happen and it’s going to be wonderful.’

### ***Failure to Convey Biblical Scholarship***

I believe this data also strongly suggests a failure by church and academy to convey in a meaningful and constructive way the results of biblical scholarship to ordinary Christian people. I include myself firmly within this criticism. Nobody referred specifically to 1 Cor. 15, or 2 Cor. 5, or Romans 8, or Mark 12:18-27

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<sup>193</sup> Ewan Kelly, *Meaningful Funerals: Meeting the Theological and Pastoral Challenge in a Postmodern Era* (London: Mowbray, 2008), 11.

<sup>194</sup> Kelly, *Meaningful Funerals*, 16.

<sup>195</sup> These are what Joseph Runzo terms ‘personal-absolute truths’, as distinct from strictly absolute truths (such as the laws of logic). Such truths are foundational to a person’s world view and are absolute from their particular perspective. See his *Reason, Relativism and God* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 155, 220-21, cited in Jeff Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1994), 285. Astley claims that personal-absolute truths ‘help to explain why philosophical relativism does not necessarily lead to religious scepticism’. He further argues (257-89) that our human situation necessarily involves relativism with regard to knowledge of God, but that a Christian learner needs to recognise this and develop their understanding and commitment *through* it. Christian educators need to point to a ‘grown-up relativism’.

(marriage in heaven). It is as if biblical teaching, academic biblical scholarship and the theology of the church down the ages had hardly communicated with them at all. In fact, the way in which biblical scholarship has been perceived by these ordinary theologians actually reinforces the first (secular) point of individual choice. That different interpretations of biblical passages are possible means only that none are definitive and trustworthy; that a process of translation and transmission of the scriptures has taken place means only that we therefore need the one correct translation, the pure original; that only some sources were selected as being canonical means only that there may be unknown or hidden sources that could yet change it all.

Towards the end of Martin's interview, in the context of discussing what church doctrine says about LAD, he told me that he had prepared for his interview with considerable thought, and had obtained a copy of Tom Wright's Grove pamphlet. However, in trying to explain why it was so difficult for people like him to understand such matters, Martin emphasised (as did many others) the differing opinions of scholars. He thought that 'there are so many different interpretations that ... *any* [his emphasis] interpretation is covered that you can make.' This is an interesting observation by a man whose career was in engineering. The sheer variety of academic views is a matter of significance for him, and is probably quite different from his experience of other, scientific disciplines where (usually) there would be, at any given time, one definitive and accepted opinion or position to learn and understand. As I have shown, these ordinary theologians have a deep suspicion of, and significant scepticism about, academic and ecclesial opinion; largely because they perceive many competing and contrasting interpretations of biblical teaching on this (and other) subjects. So why should one view be better than another, or better than theirs?

Martin referred to the Grove pamphlet during his interview, and mentioned Wright talking about two recent books (by James Barr and John Bowker). Martin then said, 'Yes, he [Tom Wright] talks of the Platonic view that the body is a shell which the immortal soul happens to inhabit. I agree with that.' Martin had, I think, misunderstood the second paragraph of page 21 of that pamphlet, and believed Wright to be a supporter of the Platonic view, rather than a severe critic of it. I mention this not to highlight Martin's misunderstanding, but to suggest that this is a vivid illustration that the best intentions and efforts of a reflective

ordinary theologian to seek help in understanding an issue of such importance as LAD, can be so easily thwarted by the academic fog of formal theological debate. Martin had also prepared for the interview by looking up ‘afterlife’ in the *New Dictionary of Christian Theology*. ‘But there are so many things that have been written about it that it’s very hard to make up your mind what the afterlife is about.’ So he had concluded that he had better just put the matter to one side until he finds out the real answer personally.

I’ve only looked at the afterlife from the point of view of what Jesus said. And [this] has been interpreted in a number of different ways; and so you cannot gain, glean, any total understanding from the Bible itself. I suppose one has to make your own mind up that there is an afterlife and leave it at that, and I’ll experience that when I get to it, if I’m so fortunate.

Martin had also tried to look at what the church teaches about LAD, but had found this equally complicated and difficult. ‘There are so many things [that have] been written about life after death, that you try, and my mind does not get around it.’ Again Martin demonstrates how difficult it can be for an ordinary theologian to seek guidance from academic sources. The church and academy might do well to ask how more effective help could be offered to genuine enquirers such as Martin.

### ***Ordinary Biblical Interpretation***

I believe that these ordinary theologians have something positive to contribute concerning correct biblical interpretation. Their views cannot simply be dismissed as the untutored ramblings of people with insufficient biblical knowledge: they have far greater significance. In one sense, this should be an obvious claim and can be supported by clear evidence of some sophisticated approaches to biblical interpretation. Duncan, for example, provided an interesting view of how belief and rationality are related, and on the importance of spirituality.

There are times when you don’t have any reason, really, for believing what you believe other than that you believe. ... I do believe that, however learned and scholarly and [pause] high-ranking or whatever, people may or may not be, I don’t think ... they have any greater access to the truth, whatever that is, than your average punter. There are plenty of ordinary people who have a far greater insight into faith and spirituality and God than many people who are in exalted positions.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> This same point is made by Paul Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978), 21 – who points out that if we see theology as grammar, then we realise that the theologian

This same sort of appeal to spiritual discernment as a key component of biblical interpretation is made (in more academic fashion) by recent reformers of theological education such as Farley, Lindbeck and Briggs.<sup>197</sup>

Another example of a sophisticated approach is from Hermione, who puts forward the view that at various stages in one's life, a particular interpretation of the Bible is better (more necessary) than another. What you believe relates to what you experience, and both develop over time.

When I was younger it was necessary to believe in one particular way, because that was more comforting to me at that age [death of her father]. So I think maybe in twenty years time I may have a different view again, because of other things that have affected, and because of, you know, the person I've become ... I think you question all the time as well. Because there is no ... definite proof of how things are.

When asked if the Bible was less clear about LAD than other areas, Nora gave a very interesting and sophisticated defence of the scriptures and the need for continuing reinterpretation.

I think as you grow, and you mature, and your life experiences change, and your knowledge of the Bible changes or deepens or whatever, you see different things in it. So I think it's maybe the responsibility is back to us isn't it? We need to be reading, and to be studying, and to be reflecting. ... if there is a weakness it's on my part, it's not on the part of the Bible.

But in order to see more clearly that the biblical views of these ordinary theologians are of importance, I return to Wright's approach to biblical interpretation. In Appendix H, I critique approaches to biblical interpretation to show that it is not possible to have either a neutral reading of a text, or a text which is not already an interpretation. The issue of world view is also critical: the modern scientific (pro-physical) world view is vastly different from the world view of first-century Palestine. This difference can have a profound effect on our interpretation of key texts regarding the physicality of the afterlife. Finally, there is a bewildering (to the ordinary theologian) array of competing 'expert' interpretations of key LAD texts. The academic process itself exacerbates this

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'gets no new revelations and has no special organ for knowledge'. Theology is thus 'enlarged', and put in the grasp of 'conscientious tentmakers, tinkers like Bunyan, lay people like brother Lawrence, and maybe someone you know down the street. ... Theology is often done by the unlikely.' Holmer concludes his book by claiming that 'the nearness of God is determined by the quality of the heart, mind and will. He is not known in paragraphs and does not teach directly'. A humbled and willing heart is 'how one becomes a true theologian, one who actually knows God' (211-12).

<sup>197</sup>Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Lindbeck, 'Spiritual Formation and Theological Education'. Richard S. Briggs, 'Scripture in Christian Formation: Pedagogy, Reading Practice and Scriptural Exemplars', *Theology* 114, no. 2 (2011), 83-90.

situation further: academic debate usually takes the form of corrections being offered to existing positions. So, for example, Cullmann accepts an interim period and disembodied existence with Christ, but wants to make sure we see it as God's gracious action and not some inherent property of the soul.<sup>198</sup> Wright wants to stress physical continuity in the afterlife as a correction to an over-heavenly position.

No wonder, then, that the ordinary theologians of this project struggle to accept the views of academic biblical interpretation or church doctrine. What in fact ordinary theologians do in deciding on the 'correct' interpretation of a text is to apply simple but effective criteria. Does it work for me; and does it fit with other areas of my life experience and my experience of Christian faith? In other words, do I really believe (*in*) it?

### *Reading Key Texts in an Ordinary Way*

I suggest that we cannot simply dismiss the apparently naïve approach to biblical texts by ordinary theologians. Rather, if ordinary theologians struggle to understand a particular biblical text or theme, or if they fail to accept one (or all) of the established academic interpretations of a text, then the academic and ecclesial communities would do well to consider carefully why this is the case. The results of this research suggest a number of such instances: the interpretation of Jesus' resurrection as a one-off proof of his person and work (rather than a foretaste of our afterlife); a non-physical afterlife in truly 'spiritual' form; a dualist view of the human person as permanent soul-spirit and temporary body; an inclusive heaven that is social in character; a desire for continuing relationships with the dead.

A simple experiment sheds further light on this situation. I wanted to see if, by reading some relevant biblical passages in the manner of an ordinary theologian, I could better understand and appreciate their interpretations. I would try to read them with a completely open mind, seeking to forget or ignore any previous academic understanding. This, of course, is an impossible ambition, but the result of this small experiment was nevertheless surprising. I realised that it was quite reasonable for the ordinary theologian to see things very differently from those who are immersed in academic theology.

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<sup>198</sup> Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*



Adopting this ‘ordinary’ approach, the remarkable interpretation of the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection in the data is actually not as surprising as one might first assume. There is no obvious mention in the Gospel accounts of *our* resurrection, and the impact on the disciples of Jesus’ resurrection can certainly suggest that affirmation of his teaching and endorsement by God are the main factors. The early speeches in Acts (by Peter, Peter and John, Stephen) are not about our resurrection, but about a gospel of repentance and Jesus being the one who told us the truth because *he* was resurrected. The key message given by the resurrected Jesus was to baptise and preach the gospel of repentance, in a rather urgent way. The setting up of a church for the long term, or thinking about what happens after natural death, is markedly absent. Also, the Synoptic Gospels could easily be read as indicating a very short period of physical resurrection for Jesus, perhaps only a few days. The timescale of forty days comes only in Acts 1.

With regard to our post-mortem condition and the nature of afterlife existence, it is surely undeniable that the Pauline texts, and 1 Cor.15 in particular, are very convoluted and complex for the ordinary reader. An interpretation of ‘spiritual body’ as meaning an entirely different form of existence from this earthly physical one is a reasonable assumption for an ordinary reader to make. Further, from this perspective the accounts in Acts of Paul seeing the risen Jesus are clearly supportive of a ‘visionary’ interpretation.

I am claiming very little for this small experiment. I am not suggesting that an ordinary (‘common sense’, or naïve) reading of Scripture is sufficient or definitive. However, I would suggest that less-ordinary theologians should think carefully before seeing any particular biblical interpretation as obvious, and think even more carefully about how their arguments can be understood at the ‘ordinary’ level. It would be interesting to speculate about ways in which an ordinary reading of a text could add a different perspective to an academic debate concerning that text, and how this might be undertaken as a structured process.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> S. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) suggests that academic study of the Bible has become increasingly sterile and irrelevant in religious and theological terms. Paul Griffiths argues that the now dominant ‘academic reading’ of Scripture is characterised by a deep concern to read just what the author actually wrote; to master it and conquer it as an object. The reader is a technician who uses the text to extract its meaning. ‘There is no moral relation between book and reader, ... its topic and goals, bear no intrinsic relation to what academic readers do and the purposes for which they do it.’ The academic reader seeks always to separate fact from value, being only interested in the former because it can be arrived at by critical empirical procedures. Academic readers ‘work in a disenchanted world’ where there is ‘just and only

That is beyond the remit of this project, however, and must be left to other researchers. What I claim in this project is only that when ordinary theologians express views which clearly support one side of an academic debate (even, or perhaps especially, the minority opinion) over the interpretation of particular text(s), then this represents a real contribution to that debate and lends support to that side. For example, the overwhelming rejection of a physical afterlife gives support to the interpretation of 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 5 along the lines of Borg rather than Wright (see Appendix H); and the unorthodox understanding of Jesus' resurrection nevertheless finds support from Wiles.<sup>200</sup>

Even when ordinary theologians express views that are at odds with all sides of an academic debate, this should still cause scholars (and the church) to wonder why. There will, of course, be instances where this means that ordinary theologians are wrong. However, the assumption that this will always be the case could deny the possibility of guidance from the Holy Spirit to the church at large.

Andrew Village makes an illuminating point in his research on how lay people read the Bible.

The perceived gap between reader and text was reduced if readers came to the text with certain presuppositions about the Bible and about the supernatural. For the scholar, this confirms that presuppositions make us blind to the 'otherness' of the text and explains why lay people fail truly to understand it. For lay people this confirms that scholars lose that crucial childlike faith that enables the text to be properly understood as a message for them and their lives today. Who is reading 'correctly' here?

Village asks, 'Do the virtues of innocence outweigh the dangers of ignorance?'<sup>201</sup>

### 3.7 THE SUPERNATURAL

I use the term 'supernatural' in this context in a very broad sense. It means, here, events occurring outside normal human experience or knowledge and not

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what can be mastered and understood by technical means'. It therefore does not provide answers to questions of value, or lead us to God, or true art, or happiness, or moral transformation. Griffiths claims that Christian reading must be understood as a transformative spiritual discipline if it is to remain Christian. P. J. Griffiths, 'Reading as a Spiritual Discipline', in L. Gregory Jones, and S. Paulsell (eds.), *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 38.

<sup>200</sup> Wiles, *Remaking Christian Doctrine*, 139, provides a notable exception to 'standard' scholarly views with his claim that the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus is less relevant than we might think, because the key thing is the context of communication with the still living disciples. 'It cannot be extrapolated from that context and used as evidence for the nature of resurrection life itself.'

<sup>201</sup> Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 90-1.

explicable by the known forces or laws of nature. This very broad definition therefore incorporates what others might term the 'paranormal', and includes the experience of ghosts, mediums, near-death experiences (NDEs), out-of-body experiences, and the presence of the known dead. However, within this broad range I want to suggest that the data shows a qualitative difference between some categories of experience.

A set of questions were included in order to ascertain the extent of supernatural experience and belief among the interviewees. These asked the interviewee: if the dead were now aware of what was happening here on earth, and if so, how; had they any direct experience of the continuing life of someone who has died; had they observed any remarkable experiences of people near to death; and, had they ever attended a Spiritualist Church or consulted a medium? The reason for including these questions was the evidence from other research that suggested a high level of supernatural belief in the general population. For example, the 'Rural Church Project' found that 26% of the total sample believed in ghosts, although this was less among the church roll people (19%). It was also a more pronounced belief in the younger age groups, generally reducing with age; these beliefs were not gender dependent.<sup>202</sup> D. J. Davies comments that his large 1995 Re-Using Old Graves survey found that 'approximately 35 per cent of this sample of the general public had gained some ... sense of the dead.' He also notes that 'when people reckon to see the dead it is usually within the domestic circle, ... where they were used to seeing the deceased when alive.'<sup>203</sup> This study shows a quite extensive range of locations for people experiencing, although not necessarily seeing, the dead: including the local seaside, and random occasions in a car or a street. With respect to ghosts, Davies points out that they are usually the unknown dead, a view supported by the present project. Abby Day<sup>204</sup> found, in her doctoral research on belief in the population at large, clear examples of supernatural experiences, including feeling the presence of deceased loved ones. But she cautions against any assumption that such experiences are necessarily religious, and so talks of the 'secular supernatural', meaning that such beliefs are

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<sup>202</sup> Davies, Watkins, and Winter, *Church and Religion in Rural England*, 250-1.

<sup>203</sup> Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* (London: Continuum, 2nd ed., 2002), 170-4.

<sup>204</sup> Abby Day, 'Believing in Belonging in Contemporary Britain: A Case Study from Yorkshire' (PhD thesis, Lancaster University, 2006).

not legitimated by belief in God. She also found that only a few of these experiences involved the unknown dead.

Young and Cullen comment, 'No sooner is the coffin closed than people encounter the dead person again. It can hardly be otherwise when the dead have left behind so many reminders of themselves, and any of the reminders can be so vivid as to recall the dead to life.'<sup>205</sup> Widows talk to husbands in the house, and 'see' him; children are told that 'grandpa's watching you'. They show, from their conversations with East Londoners, that it is a very common experience for the memory of the deceased to be so strong as to become a voice or presence. Hay and Morisy<sup>206</sup> found that 62% of a random sample of the population of a northern industrial city reported types of human activity which are commonly given a religious interpretation. One of the types of experience reported was 'presence of or help from the deceased'. The authors 'were unprepared for this group of experiences, yet they constitute more than a fifth of the total. Quite often the experiences were integrated into an orthodox theological framework.' The subjects of the present study also reported this particular experience.

My data shows a high level of supernatural experience and belief among the 26 interviewees. I was surprised by the nature and volume of these reported experiences, from people whom I had known well for many years. I was also often surprised by exactly who was telling me these things. Thus some of the clearest examples of, for instance, Spiritualist experience, came from people whom I would not easily have associated with such ideas. This also cautions against any simplistic association of supernatural beliefs with personality, psychology or personal history. My impression is that such views gain credence from personal experience and from trusting the testimony of others, plus a deep-seated view that there is 'no smoke without fire', hence something more than meets the eye must be going on. Perhaps we too easily forget that the church claims many supernatural beliefs and experiences as true (for example the healing miracles, the resurrection of Jesus, and resuscitation of corpses). The cut-off point may not be as clear as some of us, perhaps especially clergy, wish to believe.

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<sup>205</sup> M. Young and L. Cullen, *A Good Death: Conversations with East Londoners* (London: Routledge, 1996), 167.

<sup>206</sup> David Hay and Ann Morisy, 'Secular Society, Religious Meanings: A Contemporary Paradox', *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 3 (1985), 213-27.

## *Spiritualism, Mediums and Seances*

Vera related two very different experiences. The first involved an impromptu use of a Ouija board.

When it came to my turn, it seemed like it was, I'm not saying it was, my mother having a conversation with me through the words she used. She said, 'I am coping.' But it was a weird feeling and I felt very upset afterwards.

The second experience concerned someone Vera worked with, 'a nice guy who was a Spiritualist'. This man said to her one day that there was a lady standing next to her, that is, a dead person who could not be seen by others. He described this person in enough detail for Vera to identify her as a relative who had believed in Spiritualism. This experience 'was quite nice, it wasn't frightening'. I asked Vera to explain for me more clearly the difference between the two experiences. The first, she thought, was something that she should not have done. 'Maybe I disturbed something, I don't know.' The second was much nicer and just happened by chance. 'And, obviously, whoever was there wanted to come and see me; I didn't call it.' Vera said she had always been really interested in that kind of thing, but didn't think she would ever go into a séance again or anything like that, 'because I don't think that's necessarily right. I know some people think it's a load of rubbish, but it makes me feel that there is something out there and something that maybe you have to be careful about.'

Yvonne also related an uncomfortable experience. Many years ago she was in a situation where, 'like students do, somebody had an Ouija board going, and the things it said scared me off doing anything like that in the future.' She remembers that the glass seemed to be moving on its own, and she couldn't work out how it was happening. So, 'I've never ever gone in for anything like that ever again. ... it just left me cold ... I seem to remember it told people, it spelled out things, that nobody else could have known about.' Yvonne felt very uncomfortable, 'just because ... scientifically, I couldn't work out how things happened'. I asked her what she made of that experience now. 'No idea, absolutely no idea. The whole thing was weird at the time, and whether these were actual predictions ... Don't know. No idea.'

Patricia gave the clearest account of a Spiritualist influence: 'the place that has endorsed the afterlife for me is the Spiritualist Church'. She is convinced that the Spiritualist approach works. For example, 'because things that were said [at a

Spiritualist Church], and my grandfather, who couldn't talk very well, he came through; and the things that were said, I know without a doubt it was him.'

Patricia also related an experience with a medium who said that her grandmother was waiting for her. She believes this medium talked about things which nobody else could have known and that the experience helped her. Her grandfather had also 'come through' to her when she was 21, through the use of tarot cards by a medium.

Katie related one particular encounter with a medium. She went for a 'girl's night out' to a place where there were mediums and 'people who do cards'. A couple of her friends had been to one before and were convinced there was something in it, so Katie decided to try it. She went to a medium who used cards and who came out with names, like Colin Fry does. Katie was very sceptical about the names' business. 'If you go back far enough you're bound to find one.' The medium said 'James', but Katie assured her that there was no-one of that name in her family. The medium insisted and suggested that Katie ask the family about that name. So when Katie returned home, she asked her mother about the name, and was very surprised to learn that James was the name of her mother's elder brother, who had died as a child. Katie had never known this. 'I did find that strange, because she could have said any name really. ... I did think that was a bit odd, and makes me think how did this woman know that?' This kind of story is probably typical of the folklore surrounding the supernatural industry: the 'there must be something in it' kind of story.<sup>207</sup>

Duncan reported he had known some Spiritualists and respects what they think, but he is not sure how it all ties up. 'I wonder, well, there must be better and more direct ways of communicating than the way it would appear. But [pause] it interests me; I don't discount it. I wouldn't say I was a follower.' He has been to a Spiritualist Church with his wife and quite enjoyed it. He talked to someone there who was enthusiastic about ghosts in a Northumberland castle, and it all sounded very convincing and plausible. But at the same time the whole concept of dealing with spirits in a matter of fact, almost physical, way is implausible to Duncan. He doesn't doubt these people, but wonders if there could

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<sup>207</sup> Ciara'n O'Keeffe and Richard Wiseman, 'Testing Alleged Mediumship: Methods and Results', *British Journal of Psychology* 96 (2005), 165–79, conclude that, 'In short, the present study found no evidence to support the notion that the professional mediums involved in the research were, under controlled conditions, able to demonstrate paranormal or mediumistic ability.'

be other, more rational, explanations. However, Spiritualism helps persuade him of an afterlife, and does not contradict his Christian faith; in fact it reinforces it. He feels 'quite comfortable with it' and does not think he is 'going somewhere weird' when he goes to the Spiritualist Church. Duncan would actually feel weirder in some Christian churches. In the Spiritualist Church, as with any church, 'there are a range of people, some of whom you think they are just completely way out, and some who seem eminently grounded in good sense and decency and so on.' It is contact with the sensible people in the Spiritualist Church that makes Duncan think he can't discredit what they believe. This is the same with the Christian church. 'I suppose I tend not to take things as a package, which maybe I should more. And I don't in the church either. ... people might say that's ... pick and choose ... but I just think that there are elements of all aspects of life that are intermingled'. For Duncan, beliefs come from people you know and trust, and admire and respect; and this is no different with Spiritualism.

Those who had never been to a Spiritualist Church, visited a medium, or had any supernatural experience usually offered no critical opinion on those who had, or on supernatural belief in general. However, others did. Nora once did a 'séance thing' with a board when a young teenager. Something had happened, and she felt a message had been given, but found this 'quite creepy and frightening'. She has no desire to repeat this. 'I don't believe we can communicate physically with people once they've gone. I think it's hugely open to corruption. I haven't researched it, but my gut feeling is that it's open to corruption or to people using it to influence very vulnerable people.'<sup>208</sup> Hermione had been to a Spiritualist Church many years ago as a teenager with a friend, to see what it was like. 'I thought it was hilarious.' She mentioned that someone had apparently seen a dead rabbit jumping around, and she felt the whole thing misguided. She concluded, 'that's one thing I've never ever really believed in at all, sort of ghosts and things like that.'

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<sup>208</sup> Work has been done on potential fraudulent or misleading paranormal practice. For example, Richard Wiseman, Emma Greening, and Matthew Smith, 'Belief in the Paranormal and Suggestion in the Séance Room', *British Journal of Psychology* 94 (2003), 285–97, show that in the controlled context of fake séances there is a significant element of suggestion which is accepted by unknowing participants, especially those for whom the suggestions matched pre-held belief in the paranormal.

## *Ghosts and Spirits*

Charles, the only person to report an out-of-body experience, has also had other supernatural experiences; but he thought his ideas came mainly from reading around the subject, rather than the experiences themselves. 'Most of it is from our reading. Both of us [he and his wife] have steadfastly refused to take part in any of these séance sessions, holding hands round a table, that sort of thing, not really believing in it.' But, as a child, Charles saw somebody at the top of the stairs of a friend's house: a ghostly figure in white, a lady, who was seen by his friend also. This was only a childhood memory, but 'I don't dismiss reports of paranormal activity out of hand. There's obviously somebody who believes in what's been going on. And I'm not sceptical enough to say, "rubbish, go away, I don't want to know". I'll listen to what they've got to say and make my own mind up.' Charles also said that his daughter had seen the ghost of a woman who apparently haunted a local rest home. This ghost has been seen by others, and he understood it to be somebody who had died in the house before it became a rest home. He had no personal experience of this one, but the ghost he had seen as a child was almost like a physical presence, in that he could see the shape of her hands and dress. However, he was sure it was 'not solid'.

Jacob had one memorable experience of sitting bolt upright and seeing a person sitting on his bedside in the middle of the night. He couldn't get back to sleep afterwards, and was sweating. He told his wife that he had seen a woman, aged about 50, and described her clearly. This was apparently the woman who had previously been in that house, but was now dead. Jacob said this was a very real but not a pleasant experience; quite different from his experiences of the presence of dead relatives. Martin reported that a close friend had taken a photograph on which his dead grandfather, who had no known grave, had mysteriously appeared. Also, his own grandfather apparently just stayed in bed one morning and died, after saying that his dead wife had come to him in the night and said it was time to go with her. Patricia reported experiencing the presence of a long-dead Roman soldier in a house she had previously lived in.

Joselyn related her experience of the ghost of a lady that used to live in her house, whom she had never met when alive. 'I saw this lady in my bedroom just looking around, and I put my shopping down, and I went back just to speak to her or just to acknowledge her, and she was gone. ... I wasn't frightened in any way,



you know, there was no fear about it.’ Joselyn then described the woman she had seen to a neighbour who had known the previous owner, and it was the same woman. Joselyn said this is the sort of thing her Gran could do. ‘She could see people, you know. She could be sitting in bed talking to people at the bottom of her bed who we couldn’t see, but she could. And my mother was the same, and I suspect as I get older I will become the same as well.’ The ghost that Joselyn had seen was very real, ‘she looked as if I could touch her. I couldn’t see through her or anything.’

Irene has no direct experience of ghosts, but reported that ‘My grandma used to work in a hospital and she had seen sort of people [that is, dead people, ghosts] walking down corridors before. And you trust the word from someone like that, you know. It’s not just a story.’ She also mentioned a friend who told her that she had seen the dead mother of another friend. Of particular note is the fact that Irene concluded this discussion by confirming that she didn’t know of any other examples of people she knew who had directly experienced the continuing life of a dead person, but then went on to refer to the ‘biblical references’, which she explained as ‘when everyone saw Jesus after he had died’. In other words, Irene was putting the New Testament testimony of the risen Jesus in exactly the same category of experience as her Grandma seeing ghosts in a hospital. (Irene had never been to a Spiritualist Church.)

### ***NDEs and Out-of-Body Experiences***

Vera related that her mother-in-law ‘had been, towards the end, almost unconscious most of the time. But before she died, she suddenly became much more alive, which was strange. And that happens to quite a few people I think when they’re very ill. I don’t know why it should, but it seems to.’ Also, her father, when recovering from a serious illness, ‘said that he thought that he’d seen my Mum, and thought that he was going to be going away. But he knew it wasn’t time so he had come back. That’s as much as he said really.’

Martin mentioned some experiences his wife had as a nurse. For example, a patient was revived and, on waking, said ‘why did you bring me round? I was going down a tunnel and at the end was a peaceful sunlit field.’ His wife also reported seeing a big white cloud at the bottom of her bed when dealing with a particularly difficult period in her life; and she felt that she could either have left

to go with the cloud, or stayed. Jacob talked about his father-in-law who died in hospital. He was in a coma and near the point of death,

but every now and again he woke up with a smile on his face and said 'I'm going along the king's highway.' ... But he said that on several occasions ... I don't know what to make of that Michael, but he seemed at peace.

Jacob also talked of his own father who was once resuscitated after a heart attack, and 'when he came to he was really angry, and he was (laughter) swearing at his daughters; and he kept saying "I was in a beautiful place and some bugger has brought me back."' Jacob wasn't sure what this meant, but his father was obviously happy and not in pain. It was something very nice to him.

Joselyn reported that both her husband and mother had great difficulty in breathing at the end of their lives, but both, at the very end, had suddenly been able to breathe quite normally and comfortably again. Joselyn also reported an out-of-body experience which her mother had during the birth of her younger sister.

She was up on the ceiling looking down on the operating theatre and herself. ... She talked about walking along a lovely tunnel. It was green at the sides, and she was happy, and she wasn't in any pain. She was walking towards a bloke. It wasn't pearly gates or anything, but she thought it was St. Peter, and he had brown robes on ... He said to her, 'No, no we don't want you, go away. You can come back later.' And she turned and came back and then she was aware of the nurse shouting, 'We're losing her, we're losing her'.

Joselyn went on to relate the story of her young sister falling from her pram with something around her neck, choking her. Her mother, out of sight, somehow became aware that something was wrong and dashed out to save her daughter from choking. 'We know there's something wrong with each other and contact each other to see what it is. ... I've always grown up in that kind of atmosphere on my mother's side, and so it doesn't bother me. It makes me think there's another dimension. Well I know there is, there must be – which we don't always understand or know. But so what, it's there.' Joselyn said these supernatural experiences are certainly one of the influences which have shaped her views of LAD. The other influence is 'from going to church, from my faith'. She saw no conflict between these two influences.

Patricia is sure that at the point when you approach death, some people, often relatives who have died before you, 'come for you' to take you into the afterlife. She witnessed this happen with a close friend who died of cancer, and who was in

great pain. Right at the end this friend ‘brightened’, sat up, and said to someone she could obviously see but we couldn’t, ‘I’m coming’; and then just laid back and died. But Claire, a nurse, reported only that people ‘just kind of know’ when they are about to die; but she has not seen anything remarkable, and thinks she is ‘not very receptive in that way’. Nora has heard of NDEs, people who say their heart had stopped and then a bright light, and a tunnel; but believes this to be only a physical effect of the dying body.

Paul and Linda Badham argue that the ever-growing collections of NDE reports<sup>209</sup> ‘provide some of the strongest grounds for supposing that the separation of the self from the body is possible.’ They also point out the remarkable fact that those who have such experiences ‘become absolutely convinced of the reality of life after death no matter what their previous views were.’<sup>210</sup> However, the relevance of NDEs is still hotly contested.<sup>211</sup> Jan Bremmer has looked at ancient, medieval and modern accounts of NDEs and believes they are obviously culturally determined. For example, medieval NDEs are much more concerned with sin and purgation, and much less with reunion with relatives, than are modern NDEs. Bremmer concludes that modern NDEs do not prove an afterlife, but rather

testify to the continuing decline of the afterlife. Heaven is still made of gold and marble, but it is rather empty, except for a few relatives, and even God is no longer there. It has now become a means for psychological improvement, not our final destination: salvation is not outside but within us. As such, it is a clear reflection of the modern world, where the development of the individual more and more becomes the main goal of life. Evidently, every age gets the afterlife it deserves.<sup>212</sup>

An important point is being claimed here. For Bremmer and others, if the vision of heaven reflects our vision of earthly life, then it signals falsity. This is an assumption which rests on a strange premise – that something can only be judged to be trustworthy if it is somehow (impossibly) utterly new to human experience. Carol Zaleski also finds profound cultural influence in reported NDEs, but

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<sup>209</sup> The modern literature began with Raymond Moody, *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon – Survival of Bodily Death* (Covington, GA: Mockingbird Books, 1975). Recent British examples are from Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick, *The Truth in the Light* (New York: Penguin, 1996) and *The Art of Dying* (London: Continuum, 2008).

<sup>210</sup> Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction*, 78.

<sup>211</sup> Michael Marsh, *Out-of-Body and Near-Death Experiences: Brain-State Phenomena or Glimpses of Immortality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) claims that NDEs are explainable by brain neurophysiology.

<sup>212</sup> Jan N. Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife: the 1995 Read-Tuckwell Lectures at the University of Bristol* (London: Routledge, 2002), 102.

alongside remarkable similarity suggests ‘that there are some enduring – perhaps even universal – features of near-death experience.’<sup>213</sup> While NDEs cannot prove an afterlife, Zaleski believes we should take them seriously.

### ***The Presence of the Dead***

As I have explained above (see 3.2 An Immediate and Non-Physical Afterlife’ page 57), several people reported experiences of the dead very early in the interview, and this provided evidence for them of an immediate afterlife. Many others reported experience of the dead later in the interview. Laura had a definite experience of the presence of her dead sister. ‘I didn’t see her; she wasn’t there as a vision or image. ... It was just a very strong sense that she as a soul or in some other form was there in the room. ... it was very clearly her. ... She was just there. That’s the only way I can describe it.’ It was the death of her sister which prompted Laura and other members of her family to attend a Spiritualist Church, and to read about Spiritualism.

There was very often a particular way in which the presence of the dead was seen. As Janet put it, ‘I do think that they’re there trying to keep an eye on us or look after us. ... they are watching out for us.’ Patricia believes that each of us has a ‘guardian’, someone watching over us. Jacob and Duncan think that their dead relatives have an influence and concern for us now. This was a very strong element of the understanding of the presence of the dead: the comforting thought that people in the afterlife (usually, but not exclusively family) were seeking to help you in this life. This thought was also seen in discussion about ‘what we do’ in the afterlife, where some people were clear that this ‘helping’ role is an important activity which we, in our turn, will undertake in the afterlife (see pages 92ff.). Yvonne said, ‘You hope they’re like a guardian angel, ... looking after you.’ I asked her if she had felt this. ‘Hmm, definitely felt somebody’s there ... just keeping an eye on you; and you hope there is somebody there looking after your children. Well I’m sure there must be, but how or why I’ve no idea.’ Yvonne gave the startling example of one of her daughters being in a phone box two minutes before someone was murdered there. The point being it could have been her, but someone apparently was looking out for her (but presumably not for the person who was murdered). ‘You just feel there’s somebody there helping you

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<sup>213</sup> Carol Zaleski, *The Life of the World to Come: Near Death Experience and Christian Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 33.

along your way all the time, particularly if anything goes wrong, really wrong, then you feel there's something there just at the back of you.'

Several people were so sure of the presence of dead relatives with them that it was a source of real help and advice. When Katie is faced with a difficult choice, or problem, she asks herself what her dead mother and father think about it. 'I feel sometimes that decisions I've made have been guided', but this is not like 'an angel sitting on my shoulder'. Katie gave an example of a recent difficult situation where she had sat down alone and talked out loud to her dead parents.

There was nobody speaking back to me or anything like that, but I just sat here and spoke out. ... I needed somebody, and I wanted my mum or my dad to tell me what to do. ... And I did feel, you know, that I wasn't alone. ... I wasn't sitting talking to an empty room.

Martin is sure that previous generations seek to help, and cited an example from his own life where he felt influenced by someone who had died when considering taking on a church responsibility. 'I felt that [he] was behind me there, guiding me.' However, he admitted that this doesn't always seem to work. There have been other times when Martin needed such influence, but didn't get it. He doesn't know why. Duncan used to think of his deceased relatives as being in heaven and 'up there', but this has changed. 'I definitely think of people being with you in this life as it were.' Asked to explain this feeling in more detail, Duncan said, 'There are times when I think I would know what people who are close to me would do in certain situations. I sort of, [pause] yeah, that sometimes feels like guidance.' He said when important decisions are to be made, or in difficult situations or crises, 'I think just that you know you are being supported in what you are doing.'

Olive said, 'I've no desire to see a medium. ... I don't feel the need. I can talk to [deceased husband] every night and every day.' I asked her to clarify what she meant by this. 'I talk to him every night when I go to bed. [I] just sort of ask him how his day has been and go through my day. And if I've got anything bothering me I chat to him about it.' (She added that he doesn't tell her what it's like there.) Grace has also talked with her dead husband. For example, he was a handyman, so she would ask him where to find a certain tool, and shortly afterwards would just know how to find it. 'And in that way I feel he is watching over me.' Grace does not believe in 'guardian angels' as such, but is nevertheless sure that

something has helped her at key points in her life; for example, in getting a particular job which proved ideal for her.

Imogen still contacts her dead father for help whenever she is worried about something. She goes to a favourite seaside spot to 'sit and listen to the sea, and ask for my father's help'. She is absolutely sure that it is her father who is there, although he died when she was a small child. The answer comes when 'suddenly I just feel at peace, happy with myself.' She then knows what to do or say 'because I just feel comfortable with it'. If she had gone straight into the situation this would not have happened. 'But because I've talked to my dad, he sorted me, and I just go away comfortable with that. I've done that ever since I was about ten years of age.' Imogen is also sure that her father is aware of what is happening in her life. She is not sure, however, whether everyone has such a relationship with a dead person. Perhaps her relationship with her father is necessary because he died when she was young. Experiences of her dead mother, who died in old age, are quite different. 'My mother is always with me. We were together for such a long time that, ... the minute I walk there [the house] she's in the back of my mind.'

This is not always uncritical. Nora said, 'There's a fine line isn't there between, perhaps, you thinking what would they have said and what they would advise, and actually feeling a voice or hearing a voice telling you what to do.' Her experience is more like the former. She had a strong sense when younger of thinking, 'what would my father have done?' or, 'what would my Gran have said?' But as one's life moves on into situations and relationships they were not a part of, so this sense weakens. However, Nora is still clear that they have definitely influenced her, albeit not as strongly as if they were speaking to her directly. Others were more sceptical. Ursula thinks we talk to the dead in a 'one way' sense, almost like keeping them up to date with events and stages in the life of, for example, grandchildren. In effect it's 'me trying to keep him [dead father] alive for myself, and for my immediate family.' Ursula was clear that this doesn't actually keep them alive, because some people die without anyone close left behind. But in this way their lives still continue to influence people. Allan thought people who have lost a loved one may wish that they have seen them, as a way of coping with bereavement; but it is not actually possible. Of course, for Allan we are all, in effect, locked away in our personal heavens.

There was a clear division of opinion concerning whether the dead would be aware of what is happening here. For some, this was a desirable aspect of the afterlife; the ability not only to be aware of earthly life, but also to influence it. Bernard, for example, would like this, so that he could see what is going on in his family; how his children were faring. He would also like to think that he could help if needed, from the afterlife. Olive said, ‘I’d like to think my parents have seen [pause] have somehow known about the family that has carried on since then, and their parents before them.’ Others, however, pointed out that this could be hellish rather than heavenly, depending on what they saw of earthly life. Ursula questions why you would want to know what you were missing, or the mistakes your children were making without your guidance, or how your wife’s new husband was making her very happy? In the group meeting she commented that we can’t see what our family does in this way in this life, so why should we in the next; and if we could, surely it would be much worse? But there is another point seemingly overlooked by those who take the view that the dead are aware of the lives of the living: would not simply being conscious and aware of your post-mortem state produce some of these same problems? In other words, one would be aware of what one had left behind, albeit temporarily; so perhaps knowing what was going on is not as bad as they imagine?

From an analysis of written memorials at a hospice, Andrew Goodhead suggests that the use of traditional religious language in such expressions of mourning is the result of a lack of secular vocabulary, and belief in the afterlife has been transformed into a ‘familial reunion’.

By writing that the deceased person has gone to heaven, a sense of control is gained over a catastrophic moment. The survivor’s desire for the dead to be in the presence of God or angels means the deceased person is not alone.<sup>214</sup>

In a remarkable and detailed study of a small group of terminally ill patients and their carers, Young and Cullen found strong belief in reunion with dead loved ones, and common experience among the bereaved of their continuing presence.<sup>215</sup> The subjects mostly considered themselves to be attached to a church, but ‘There was little indication that people in general had got their belief in the afterlife from their church.’ The church views which they had heard and

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<sup>214</sup> Andrew Goodhead, ‘A Textual Analysis of Memorials Written by Bereaved Individuals and Families in a Hospice Context’, *Mortality* 15, no. 4 (2010), 323-39.

<sup>215</sup> Young and Cullen, *A Good Death*, 172-3.

known seemed different to their ‘seeing and hearing’ of the dead now. ‘Most did not think of the experiences they were now having in their encounters with the dead as being in any way the same as those that were featured in the church.’ Their religion was mostly private and personal, and based on love in the sense that only if they loved the person who had died would they believe in that person’s continuing existence. This is not biblically or doctrinally orthodox, but rather reflects their assumption that only the loved seem to live on. Their religion is a ‘family religion’, mostly to do with family reunion. In his study of older Aberdonians, Williams also found that, with regard to the afterlife, ‘the usual conception was a reunion with kin in a better place.’<sup>216</sup>

Bennett and Bennett claim that there is bias toward the ‘materialist discourse’ in much of the literature regarding experience of the dead. Thus, it is often assumed by researchers that the explanation for such events involves hallucination and illusion rather than any other form of reality: a human mind coping with grief rather than any contact with a spiritual reality beyond this life. In contrast, there is another explanatory framework which they claim is equally rational and traditional, the ‘supernatural discourse’. This alternative discourse includes claims of contact with the dead via a soul or spirit existing in an afterlife. Bennett and Bennett found that subjects would switch between these two discourses depending on their perceived expectation of the interview context, with many being reluctant to ‘risk’ the supernatural explanation in certain situations.<sup>217</sup> In this project it is clear that these churchgoing subjects were happy to offer a supernatural discourse of the soul and afterlife as their real experience.

### ***Continuing Relationships with the Dead***

There was a significant difference in tone between reported experiences of the dead. Most experiences were comfortable, even enjoyable, but some of the ghost stories and experiences of séances or mediums were not. ‘Ghost’ was not a term used by people who were relating experiences of their dead relatives or those known to them. Ghosts are generally the unknown dead, and this can sometimes be a quite disturbing experience, especially if linked to a view of ghosts as disturbed spirits, or spirits with something yet to do or put right. There are also

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<sup>216</sup> Williams, *A Protestant Legacy*, 129.

<sup>217</sup> Gillian Bennett, and Kate Mary Bennett, ‘The Presence of the Dead: An Empirical Study’, *Mortality* 5, no. 2 (2000), 139-57.



two very different reactions with regard to séances and mediums. There are those who are quite convinced by and quite comfortable with such things; and there are those who have been frightened or disturbed by them. This suggests that there is a basic difference between a benign, reassuring experience of a dead relative or friend, and a more disturbing supernatural experience. The former is, at least tacitly, also seen as much more within the realm of Christian experience, and in fact has been seen as such historically within the tradition (see below).

Moltmann provides a modern argument for a continuing relationship with the dead. ‘Ideas about a life after death are not only important for the dying and the dead. They are also important for the living, who see themselves as “coming after” or as the “surviving bereaved”. These ideas express the relationships of the dead to the living and of the living to the dead, and influence the life led in remembrance or forgetfulness of those who have died.’ Moltmann believes that we have lost in modern western societies the idea of a ‘sequence of generations’; we venerate the young and disregard the old (who are nearing death). He warns that ‘Anyone who forgets the rights of the dead will be indifferent toward the lives of those to come as well. Without a “culture of remembrance” that tries to do justice to the dead, there will also be no “culture of hope” that will open up a future for our children.’<sup>218</sup>

Carlos Eire claims that the medieval world was one which took eternity very seriously; it was ‘the warp and woof of the medieval West.’<sup>219</sup> The rituals of the medieval church made eternity available to people. Every mass was a miracle linking heaven and earth, and also linking the living and the dead. Masses for the dead could reduce time in purgatory for the deceased; the dead were not segregated, but were brought into church and buried there. There were undoubtedly many distortions and corruptions of these ideas, ‘but no matter how crassly unspiritual many of the established customs, feasts, and rituals of medieval Europe might have been, the fact remains that eternity infringed on the temporal world at nearly every turn, not just as a concept but also as something of real political, social, and economic value.’<sup>220</sup>

Eire emphasises that the Reformation brought about a fundamental revision of the relationship between the living and the dead, and between the temporal and

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<sup>218</sup> Moltmann, ‘Is There Life After Death?’, 253-5.

<sup>219</sup> Eire, *Brief History of Eternity*, 70.

<sup>220</sup> Eire, *Brief History of Eternity*, 91.

eternal. Initially this happened along the fault line of the afterlife, but then went on to incorporate monasticism, mysticism, and clerical claims to superiority. Pre-Reformation, the dead could command time, money, and energy from relatives and friends in the celebration of masses and other ways that sought to reduce time in purgatory. The dead could be great aids, putting forward arguments on your behalf in heaven. But the Reformation changed all of this. For Luther, 'death was no gossamer veil through which the living and the dead remained within sight of each other but rather the thickest of final curtains.' Death was a one-way lonely experience. There was now no such thing as purgatory, and the communion of saints was an eschatological hope of the resurrection and kingdom to come. Ghosts and visions of the dead were demonic, not human. Eire claims that the idea of purgatory was borne, not out of formal theology or Scripture, but rather from practical piety, ritual, and logic.

Sheer hope in the possibility of forgiveness in the afterlife, coupled with the longing for some connection with the dead, had more to do with purgatory than did biblical interpretation: it was an eschatological necessity drawn from the inevitably painful reality of grief, the certainty of moral failure in this life, and the fear of eternal damnation.<sup>221</sup>

It would seem that modern British people continue to seek relationships with their dead loved ones, as Eire tells us was the norm in medieval Europe. This is not just about any final reunion in the afterlife, but rather about contact between the dead and the living. In fact, some of these ordinary theologians look forward to taking a role in this relationship from the afterlife, maintaining links with the living. Is ordinary theology here pointing to a necessary continuing element of the Christian understanding of death?<sup>222</sup> This data shows a strong desire for continuing relationships with the dead and some significant experience of this taking place.

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<sup>221</sup> Eire, *Brief History of Eternity*, 109-10.

<sup>222</sup> The idea of the purpose of grief as being to sever the bonds of a bereaved person with the dead and thereby make her open to new relationships has been strongly challenged recently by a new model of grief based on *continuing* bonds with the dead. See Dennis Klaass, Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman (eds.), *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996).

### 3.8 FORMATION AND EFFECTS

What influences have been at work in shaping the views of these ordinary theologians concerning LAD? Tony Walter points out that most of us now don't actually witness death at all, and we are largely informed by cinema and media (which dramatises the process) rather than by real experience.<sup>223</sup> Peter Jupp also points to the effect of film and TV in making plausible images of afterlife that have little basis in religious tradition, such as reincarnation and beneficent ghosts. 'Those whose Christian ministry is to comfort bereaved people in public or in private must take account of the fact that, today, people's beliefs are unlikely to be traditional, and are far more individualistic.'<sup>224</sup> Sara Knox points to the way in which contemporary cinematic representation of dying and death illustrate our cultural preoccupation with how individual identity may be preserved beyond death.<sup>225</sup> One example she uses is *Vanilla Sky*, a source of inspiration for Allan and his individual heavens (see page 55). It seems that for the population at large we should expect considerable cultural influence. As Davies suggests:

Many people probably gain their ideas of the afterlife as much from ghost films or science fiction as from the New Testament with, perhaps, the para-medical world linking the two through the two new categories of 'near-death-experience' and 'out of the body experience'.<sup>226</sup>

However, with regard to the group of Christians who are the subject of this study, this is not the case. Walter suggests three reasons why non-religious people may hold beliefs about LAD, or why religious people do not link it to other beliefs: intuitions from paranormal or mystical experiences; the fact that the church has little control over belief, and 'pick and choose' reigns (perhaps especially in the area of LAD, where doctrine is lacking or unclear); and tolerance both inside and outside churches, together with postmodern scepticism of any belief system, including science.<sup>227</sup> I believe this is much nearer the mark, pointing us back to the supernatural and to individualism and relativism.

Indications of major sources of influence were given by the subject throughout these interviews. In one sense, the whole interview was a potential opportunity for the subject to convey such information, and for me to pick this up.

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<sup>223</sup> Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 36.

<sup>224</sup> Jupp and Rogers (eds.), *Interpreting Death*, 7.

<sup>225</sup> Sara L. Knox, 'Death, Afterlife, and the Eschatology of Consciousness: Themes in Contemporary Cinema', *Mortality* 11, no. 3 (2006), 233-52.

<sup>226</sup> Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief*, 173.

<sup>227</sup> Walter, *Eclipse of Eternity*, 45.

I am sure this did not happen perfectly or comprehensively, from either side, but sufficient communication and understanding did take place for me to identify clearly two major factors. In the final part of the interview, I usually tried to check what they had indicated to be the main influences, and to ask if there were others that had not been mentioned. I also asked if their views had changed over time. The two major sources of influence identified by these ordinary theologians concerning their views on LAD are family and church background, and their experiences of the supernatural.

### ***Family and Church Background***

Alice's views have changed over time; for example, she used to believe in hell but not now. 'It's growth and development through experience and through Bible learning and going to church and mixing with people who go to church.' She explained that 'I think what my beliefs come from is what I've been taught over the years.' The people who have most influenced her, from Sunday school onwards, have been those who 'you respected always, and haven't really heard anything bad about them since'. People outside church have also been influential for Alice, for instance, lecturers and work colleagues. She gave the example of someone at work who sat with her and prayed with her when she was in trouble. Very important for Alice have been the 'people who have shaped my thoughts'; but she hasn't accepted any one particular view, but rather has developed her own.

Olive said she thought her belief in LAD had always been there due to her upbringing, the influence of her parents and going to church from being very small. Her views had not changed. Imogen said she had come to her present views, 'mainly I think through, *a*, my upbringing, involvement with church since I was three; *b*, with patients, listening to a number of them that talked about dying.' Her views 'have become clearer. Certainly when I was younger I don't think I even thought about life after death. When you are a teenager you don't.' She began to think about it in her 20s and 30s. Gregory echoed these thoughts in saying that he probably didn't think about it carefully or strongly until more recently, as he's grown older. 'The nearer you get to it the more you think about it.' When parents have died, and contemporaries start to die, then you think about

it more. Bernard thinks that life experience is necessary to form stable views about LAD. The birth of his own children has made him think more about this.

Nora believes her views have developed over time, although even as a child she had a simple belief in the afterlife. In adult life this has developed; as you experience the death of people close to you, you think more about your faith and LAD. Also influential for Nora have been people who pose questions which make her stop and think. Nora is thankful for being brought up in the Christian faith, and feels that lots of young people now do not cope with death because they have no faith. She feels that she would have been lost without her faith. Yvonne pointed to 'Just the experience you've had in life, and ... other people's experiences I suppose. It's something you don't really discuss with anybody. Nobody has ever discussed their views of life after death with me.' She thinks we should talk about it more in church.

### *Experience of the Supernatural*

Several clear examples of strong influence were given by subjects when relating their experience of the supernatural (see 3.7 The Supernatural' page 112). In addition, other confirmations of strong influence from supernatural experience were given in the final part of the interview, sometimes these are not direct experiences but rather the experiences of others.

Jacob said his mother and his personal experience had been important in forming his views; but a key aspect of his experience has been a clear sense of the presence of deceased relatives. Irene has been influenced by the Bible but also by supernatural experiences of family and friends which had been related to her. Two of her friends had seen ghosts, 'that definitely made me believe. ... You hear lots of things like that, and I do believe they have influenced me and that there is something still there.' James has been greatly influenced by his experience of a ghost, and other spiritual phenomena, which would have to be comprehensively explained by any satisfactory view of the afterlife. When asked if the church had taught him about LAD, James said, 'I don't think it has really. No. I don't think it's changed anything as far as teaching me anything about it.' He thinks that perhaps the church should be clearer in teaching about LAD, and that we should talk more about it in church. James has not been to a Spiritualist Church, but his mother had been and he said she had 'experienced this sort of thing'. He also had

an Auntie who claimed to be a medium. Laura said, 'The main influence I suppose is from Christianity and being brought up in the church, and ending up with the view that there is afterlife, there is life after death. ... beyond that any of the detail probably comes from reading around much of the either Spiritualist or NDE literature.' Laura read this because of the death of a close relative, which 'impelled me to go back to church' to look for answers or some kind of explanation. However, the church was not too good initially, so she experimented with Spiritualism.

### *Nature*

A third minor factor was also identified. Alice has been influenced by places of natural beauty where she has felt at peace. Claire also has been influenced by the 'great outdoors'. The amazing beauty of the natural world shows, in her opinion, that there must be a God. And the natural world must be a 'precursor of heaven'. She said, 'If that's what he can do on earth, goodness knows what we're going to get in heaven. And not just the physical, but that feeling when you're outside in the middle of nowhere, in the highlands of Scotland. That's like a glimpse of how it's going to feel in heaven.' Martin recalled the impact of scout camps many years ago, where 'you have a feeling of limitless space and that there is some other life.'

### ***The Effect of Belief in LAD***

One of my initial interests in this research concerned theodicy. I wanted to explore the link between suffering and the afterlife, and so devoted a section of the interview to this issue. I also wanted to explore whether having a belief in LAD made a difference to how suffering and death were understood and dealt with in this life.

### *Theodicy is Not an Issue*

It quickly became apparent that theodicy was not an interest shared by most of these ordinary theologians. It seemed that for nearly all it was either a question with such an obvious solution that they were puzzled as to why was I asking it; or that it was not actually a question for them at all. Martin, for example, said he had never thought about this, and yet he, like many others, had given great thought to

many of the other issues raised by the interview. Several people said that, of course, they knew that bad things happened, but they just did. It was not God's 'fault', nor was it a 'problem' for their faith. Perhaps this is a clear message to me, and to others who seek to apply philosophical theology to a more straightforward human experience.<sup>228</sup>

Vera was typical in thinking that the key thing about the afterlife is that suffering stopped there. The physical suffering so prevalent in our human experience would simply cease in the non-physical afterlife. Also typical was the idea that the fact of afterlife in itself 'puts things right'. There was no sense of the rage against suffering which is so clearly conveyed in the theology of McCord Adams, or the demand for God to 'make it right' for each person individually in heaven. Neither was there acceptance of the notion that one could be angry with God for the sufferings of this life.<sup>229</sup> Indeed, there was often clear surprise when I raised this. The overwhelming view was that a wonderful afterlife would obviously make it all fine. All will be well.

Ursula speaks for the majority when she says, 'life after death is not an answer to suffering, it doesn't explain why it happens to some and not others.' Perhaps more importantly, the 'problem' of theodicy is not present in these ordinary theologians. Ursula is clear. 'No matter how terrible your life has been, in the afterlife it won't matter; and I don't think in the afterlife you'll be thinking, "I had an awful earthly life and he had a wonderful earthly life." I think those sort

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<sup>228</sup> There are of course good reasons for questioning the classical approach to theodicy. Rowan Williams, 'Of Course This Makes us Doubt God's Existence', <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2005/01/02/do0201.xml> (3 June 2011) reacts to the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 by recalling his memories as a sixth former of the earlier Aberfan disaster. 'I remember watching a television discussion about God and suffering that weekend – with disbelief and astonishment at the vacuous words pouring out about the nature of God's power or control, or about the consolations of belief in an afterlife or whatever.' For Rowan Williams, the rational discussion of the 'problem' of the origin of such evil is misplaced and counter-productive in actually coping with such suffering. 'If some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why all these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God?' he asks. John Swinton (*Raging with Compassion*, 17-29) raises similar issues about the dangers of theodicy in real pastoral situations, arguing that we must be counter-cultural in not offering answers. 'The inadequacy of our knowledge is a good argument for *not* trying to offer explanations.' Indeed, Swinton points to Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 221-57, for the view that 'theodicists are like the whispering friends of Job who torture rather than help'. So theodicy can actually become evil in itself. Even Marilyn McCord Adams (*Christ and Horrors*, 40-5) distinguishes between *justifying* and *explanatory* reasons: explanatory reasons can be put forward as to why God allows creaturely freedom and evil, but they cannot be justifying reasons. She argues that the problem of evil is not theoretical (how God and evil exist together) but existential – why did God not prevent us from suffering, does he not care for us?

<sup>229</sup> The great accusation of Ivan Karamazov seems not to be echoed in these ordinary theologians - *The Brothers Karamazov*, 287-8.

of things will just not be important.’ Duncan said belief in LAD ‘doesn’t help me rationalise the whys and wherefores of suffering in this life.’

### *Belief in LAD Does Make A Difference*

The question of whether belief in LAD makes a difference produced more clarity and enthusiasm than the issue of theodicy. Alice was typical in saying that, for her, it certainly does; because she does not worry about dying and never has done. Bernard feels it has really helped him, and he will talk to his own young children at the appropriate time about LAD so that they will also have this belief to help them. Claire thinks that at funerals she sees how people without this belief struggle to cope with death. The LAD faith of her father was a great help to her when he died. Jacob can’t understand how people can cope in this life without faith; what happens when they ‘hit the wall [of facing death]?’ Nora also wonders about how people can cope with death without faith, and suggested that the increase in grief/bereavement counselling is an indication of this. Charles would prefer a bereaved person to have Christian friends to help rather than ‘professional comforters’. Katie thinks it does make a difference, ‘that’s why I’m not frightened.’ Joselyn said, ‘I really do not know how people deal with death if they haven’t got a faith. I think that must be a very, very difficult thing to do.’ Irene said, ‘Yeah, it helps knowing that this is not it, that there will still be more.’ Felicity says LAD makes a difference ‘because I’m not afraid of it [death], and I feel it’s quite exciting, and something to look forward to really.’ Gregory said it does make a difference for him, because without it, ‘I might be more troubled ... by death.’

This strong affective dimension demonstrates the seriousness with which belief in LAD is held by these ordinary theologians. However, there was an exception to this view from two people, who made an important point about how some will experience the death of a loved one. Laura does not feel that belief in LAD has helped her, ‘because what you’re missing is the person who was there, and who no longer is, and who is not going to be for the rest of your life. So, whether they are living in another dimension or not doesn’t change the fact that they are not there with you now.’ Hermione also took this view. ‘When someone very close to you dies, your grief is for yourself not for the person who has gone. So your views of whether life after death even exists, there’s no real impact on



your grief, because your grief is about the fact that you've been left and not where they've gone. So that would make absolutely no difference. ... Your grief is what you're feeling because you don't have that person anymore.'<sup>230</sup>

### ***Reluctance to Talk about LAD***

In contrast to clear views about how much a belief in LAD matters, there was a very marked reluctance on the part of the interviewees actually to speak to someone recently bereaved, or someone facing death, about LAD. For example, Alice said it had never entered her head to talk about this with her husband when he was very ill. On the rare occasions when something had been said, it was usually in very bland or general terms, such as 'they (the deceased) are not suffering now'. Janet would say to a bereaved person that the deceased is still with you and watching out for you, and not in pain, but 'I don't know that I would feel comfortable saying anything to people whilst they're still here.' Gregory and Jacob were not unusual in saying that they had never talked about LAD to anyone who had been bereaved, nor had anyone ever talked to them about this, other than clergy.

Nora is an exception to this general state of affairs. She has talked about LAD in bereavement situations with relatives after family deaths, and found it very comforting, a 'lovely conversation'. She believes that doing this is mutually supportive, and that families or groups with a shared faith need to do it. Felicity is also unusual in actually talking about LAD, largely because she does hospital visiting where this topic comes up quite regularly. However, 'I think you've got to be careful not to overdo it.'

Claire has said something to a friend who had faith, but would not say anything to someone without faith. Olive stressed the comfort which her own belief in LAD gave her, but was reluctant to use these words with others, although she had 'tried to reassure people'. She said, 'I believe my beliefs and my religion in a lot of ways is a very personal thing, so I'm very conscious of not trying to thrust it [on others]'. Allan would not want to force his views on anyone by talking to them about LAD, but he would try to 'be there for them'. Imogen said

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<sup>230</sup> See Richard Golsworthy, and Adrian Coyle, 'Spiritual Beliefs and the Search for Meaning among Older Adults Following Partner Loss', *Mortality* 4, no. 1 (1999), 21-40, who report the common finding of a permanence of feelings of loss. 'The existence of a religious meaning structure did not appear to lessen feelings of grief, although participants did not seem to think of this as indicating that their beliefs were not helpful.' (p. 36)

the only example of people saying something to her regarding death or suffering is a Jehovah's Witness. Joselyn has written to people who have been bereaved, but she will not say that 'time heals everything'; it doesn't, it just helps you to cope. Also, she doesn't agree with the often-expressed sentiment that it 'would be a blessing' for someone in pain to die. She is not sure why people feel the need to talk to strangers in bereavement counselling, and would have turned to the church if she had needed help in this way.

Within the group meeting, which was organised in response to requests to be able to share views on LAD, the issue of whether we should talk more about LAD was raised several times. Laura: 'Maybe it should be more of a, you know, an everyday thing because people die all the time, and we're going to die, you know, it's the one certain thing.' Felicity 'was just so curious to know what other people had said.' Laura replied, 'It's never sort of discussed.' Joselyn: 'No, it's not your everyday subject is it?' Olive commented that 'I think until it has sort of personally affected you, you tend not to think about it.' Claire had seen lots of death and dying as a nurse, but confirmed that, 'until I lost dad, it didn't click.'

I commented in the group meeting that the conversation seemed very easy and natural, but that some in the interviews had asked why we don't talk about it more in church. Should we talk more about it? Ursula commented, 'I think as a society we don't talk about death, ... but I think if we just talked about it all the time more as part of life we would be better prepared, you know, whether as Christians or not, and as a society.'<sup>231</sup> She related the experience of her first funeral, of her grandmother when she was aged 23, and reflected on the fact that she didn't know what would actually happen, and so felt very anxious about it all.

This interview data suggests that a reluctance to talk about LAD is an interesting variation of the relativism and individualism identified above with regard to biblical and church authority. It is the opposite side of the same coin. As individuals we have the right to form and hold our own opinions, so the opinions

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<sup>231</sup> A notable recent development in seeking to change public attitudes towards death and dying is the 'Dying Matters Coalition', formed in 2009 by the National Council for Palliative Care. The Coalition's Mission is 'to support changing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards death, dying and bereavement, and through this to make "living and dying well" the norm'. The Coalition recognises that 'This will involve a fundamental change in society in which dying, death and bereavement will be seen and accepted as the natural part of everybody's life cycle. Changes in the way society views dying and death have impacted on the experience of people who are dying and bereaved. Our lack of openness has affected the quality and range of support and care services available to patients and families. It has also affected our ability to die where or how we would wish.' <http://www.dyingmatters.org/overview/about-us> (June 30 2011).

of scholars and church are just that, other opinions. But because we realise the importance of our own opinions as *our* opinions, we are very reluctant to suggest to anyone that they might like to think of a different view. This reluctance is both a result of embarrassment and the fear of giving offence. Even those within church communities are not easily able to talk about death and LAD. However, this data also shows that these church members perceive clearly the potential value of bringing LAD 'out into the open' by just such discussion and sharing of views. The church is well placed to seek to reintroduce 'death talk' as a necessary and beneficial part of social reality. Perhaps a first step would be for more clergy to listen to more ordinary theologians concerning their ordinary eschatology.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

### 4.1 A METHOD AND CONCEPT TESTED

The basic method of this project has worked well and can be commended for other congregational settings. The dual role of interviewer-minister has great potential for enabling interviewees to disclose with confidence deeply-held beliefs and ideas which were hitherto 'hidden'. Listening is a very important tool of a minister or priest: this project has shown that it can be greatly empowering for ordinary Christian members of a church. I believe it is clear that the subjects of this research benefited from the experience. They greatly appreciated being listened to and being taken seriously on matters of theological concern.<sup>232</sup> They also learned a great deal from their critical reflection on their own beliefs, a process encouraged by this interview method; and they enjoyed doing it.<sup>233</sup>

The researcher's experience is also relevant. I have had the great privilege of hearing most of my congregation telling me with complete honesty and sincerity what they really think and believe about LAD. This has been in some ways a very humbling experience. I have become more fully aware of them as extra-'ordinary' Christians seeking to live their faith. I have been entrusted with deeply felt memories and personal stories, and have been allowed to share in how they view their ultimate destiny beyond death. I believe that I now appreciate more fully the value and richness of the non-systematic ordinary theology of those to whom I minister.

Also proven in this project is the value of ordinary theology as a practical concept for the church. It is absolutely clear to me that members of my congregation do ordinary *theology*: perhaps not consistently or systematically but

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<sup>232</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 141-66, and 253-5, argues that 'Pastoral ethnography is, at its heart, a listening practice', and that 'listening is an act of love'. She claims that 'listening begins with relationships to individual persons', which is certainly my experience in this project. My long-standing relationship with the subjects of this study actually helped me to listen properly, in a loving way which, as Moschella claims, honours the person and the presence of God in that person. Moschella further claims that listening to someone describe their faith practices 'is fundamentally a theological act', and can be 'a form of empowering love, a gift of time and kind regard, that leaders can both practice and nurture in faith communities'. Astley (*Ordinary Theology*, 146-7) strongly argues that the church needs to listen to its ordinary members, and that the clergy need to be well trained in 'looking and listening and learning'. Listening is 'a mark of respect ... a deeply pastoral, affirming act ... [and] tells people that they matter'.

<sup>233</sup> Astley (*Ordinary Theology*, 119) points out that facilitating the self-description of a person's theology can be a 'powerful engine for learning change'. What almost always happens is that 'the individual, in articulating their own beliefs, slides naturally and easily into assessing them critically. .... Unearthing a person's ordinary theology is therefore itself part of the critical task.'

sincerely and in a critically reflective manner. I believe they have now begun to realise this themselves, which is a remarkable comment on how church and academy have hitherto valued their views. It should be obvious that those who actually live the Christian faith test out the beliefs and practices of that faith. It is surely reasonable to expect that the guidance of the Holy Spirit will at least sometimes, albeit always imperfectly, be discerned by such people: they are ‘signal processors’ of the Spirit. It is surely also reasonable that church and academy should therefore seek to hear and take seriously this ordinary theological voice. With regard to LAD this voice has said some remarkable and important things.

## 4.2 THE KEY ELEMENTS OF ORDINARY ESCHATOLOGY

The following issues are the key findings on ordinary eschatology from this project:

1. The afterlife is immediate: there is no ‘soul-sleep’ or unconscious state. Experiences of the dead confirm this; and ordinary theologians do not find any sense in the idea of an unconscious interim period. We continue to exist spiritually after death, so why should we not always be conscious of this?
2. Human beings are dual in nature: there is a substantial soul (or ‘spirit’), and this is what survives death and leaves the ‘shell’ of the body. As God himself is non-physical, we can also live in a ‘spiritual’ form. A dualist view is confirmed by human lived experience of the ‘inner self’, and a strong belief in continuing personal identity post-mortem resulting from a substantial non-physical ‘me’. This is also confirmed by those ‘lost’ to dementia, but still living.
3. The afterlife is obviously non-physical. Bodies of dead people are clearly experienced as ‘empty’. Physicality is actually the problem: it is not a desirable experience to repeat because it means suffering, decline and death. The afterlife must be quite different, which means it must be non-physical. The very idea of a physical afterlife is ridiculous because of practical and logical problems: space and resources, organisation and regulation, meeting recognisable others, environmental and climatic issues.

But the non-physical afterlife will have elements of physical-like experience, to continue aspects of this earthly life.

4. The afterlife will be social, but this does not necessarily mean that we will meet everyone, or that earthly relationships will continue in the same way. God will probably be present in the afterlife, but many thought it unlikely that we would 'meet him personally'. There is probably no form of objective judgement, but perhaps some form of self-judgement. While some expect that the afterlife will be active; others hope for something that is quite the opposite.
5. So complete is the notion of a non-physical afterlife that resurrection has been confused by some with reincarnation. The idea of 'becoming physical again' has moved so far from traditional Christian ideas in the minds of some of these ordinary theologians that it has become associated with the non-Christian idea of reincarnation.
6. Jesus' physical resurrection is not relevant to our final afterlife state. It was a completely unique event, which was necessary to provide sufficient proof to confirm who he was and the value of what he had taught us. It also showed that there would be LAD, but this will be a non-physical soul-spirit existence (which is what Jesus himself entered following his brief resurrected 'proof-state').
7. There is deep scepticism concerning any claim by either academy or church to a definitive interpretation of what the Bible says concerning LAD. This is a consequence of the mutually reinforcing factors of the influence of relativism and individualism in contemporary British culture, and the failure of church and academy meaningfully to convey the results of biblical and theological scholarship.
8. The 'ordinary' approach to biblical interpretation is 'what works for me' What the Bible is understood to say must make sense to life experience and context. An 'ordinary' reading of key LAD texts can provide relevant commentary on current academic debates concerning the interpretation of those texts.
9. Experience of the supernatural is a significant factor for many ordinary theologians. In particular, experience of the known dead confirms that there is LAD and that it is immediate, good, and social. The frequency of

such experiences suggests a continuing need on the part of modern protestant Christians for contact with the dead.

10. Family and church background has also been important in forming the views of these ordinary theologians. Belief in LAD makes a difference for these people in how they face their own death and how they deal with the death of loved ones. It removes fear, and provides comfort and hope of reunion. Theodicy is not seen as an issue. There is no need to explain differential suffering in this life: *all* will be well in the afterlife.
11. Despite the deep level of disclosure of views within interviews, there is nevertheless a marked reluctance on the part of these ordinary theologians to express their LAD views to others. They have rarely sought to help others in their bereavement situations by talking about LAD, and have rarely received such help in their own bereavements. Yet they were very interested in the views of others who had taken part in the project, and recognised that we could benefit from being more open about talk of LAD.

### ***A Potential Criticism***

Of course, all of this is open to the criticism of wish-fulfilment: the continuing re-invention of heaven to meet the changing longings and imaginings of human beings. The accusation can be made that ‘popular views of life after death smack more of an eternally cosy family circle than of the call of a dramatically creative God.’<sup>234</sup> Alan Segal applies this form of scepticism to an historical overview of the afterlife in religions of the West, asking what he sees as the key question – ‘To whose benefit is this belief in the afterlife?’<sup>235</sup> The basic assumption of his approach is that beliefs emerge from culture in order to serve the (non-theological) purposes of some people. The great variety of concepts of the afterlife shows simply the great variety and ingenuity of changing cultures. He rejects out of hand any possibility of the revelation of something beyond human experience. A clear victim of his study is ‘the reassuring notion that the afterlife is part of unchanging revealed truth. ... We are telling ourselves what the Scriptures must mean in the current circumstance; it is not God speaking to us directly.’<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Douglas J. Davies, ‘Theologies of disposal’, in Jupp and Rogers (eds.), *Interpreting Death*, 82-3.

<sup>235</sup> Alan Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 4.

<sup>236</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 710.

This is an extremely narrow view of biblical interpretation and continuing revelation.<sup>237</sup> Ultimately, Segal is simply rejecting the possibility of the Christian God, replacing it with a self-contained human explanation. If a concept of heaven was not relevant to the prevailing cultural milieu, then what meaning could it have?

Wiles reminds us that

our assessment of the evidence is bound (logically bound) to be related to our general expectations of what is conceivable. If there were nothing (literally nothing) in our more general experience that made the idea of a survival of death a conceivable notion, then we would be forced to conclude that in no sense could Jesus be understood to have survived death.<sup>238</sup>

Zaleski is clear that God must use our human symbols and images if he wishes to be known. ‘If God is willing to descend into our human condition, may he not also, by the same courtesy, descend into our cultural forms and become mediated to us in and through them?’<sup>239</sup> This point is not lost on ordinary theologians. In the group meeting, Ursula made the point that ‘I think the trouble is we can only sort of try and relate it to life on earth and we always try to do that don’t we, but it must be completely different.’ Laura thinks, ‘the human mind needs to construct something that makes sense to it.’

McDannell and Lang argue that, unlike other theological doctrines, LAD does not progress in a linear fashion toward some overall agreed position. ‘Christians still associate God with the afterlife, but the great variety of concepts of God which exist in the contemporary Christian world erases the possibility of a common notion of heaven.’<sup>240</sup> During the pendulum swings between anthropocentric and theocentric views of heaven, which have taken place throughout Christian history, there is development and change and not simply repetition. ‘Traditional concepts and concerns lead to ever new and characteristic configurations coloured by the general cultural and social climate. We would be wrong in defining the history of heaven as the alternation between human wishful thinking and biblical truth.’<sup>241</sup> Jeffrey Russell makes a similar point about the

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<sup>237</sup> Compare the views of David Brown outlined above – see pages 24ff. ‘Continuing Revelation’.

<sup>238</sup> Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, 131-2.

<sup>239</sup> Zaleski, *The Life of the World to Come*, 35.

<sup>240</sup> McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 351.

<sup>241</sup> McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 357.



concept of heaven, which can be heard as singing in the silence of human existential longing.

Theological tradition claims that over time the tradition develops under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and ends by telling the equivalent of truth as God knows it. The history of concepts respects but does not endorse that claim. One cannot assume that the concept of heaven progresses inevitably until it becomes complete; it may continue to open out perpetually. ... Concepts develop through time. Some concepts die; others narrow down; others stagnate. The concept of heaven opens. It opens up in the cosmos in ever-widening circles and opens down in the human character to the deepest self.<sup>242</sup>

It is undeniable that views of heaven change over time and are influenced by shifts in the prevailing social and cultural norms: the extent of historical variation in concepts of heaven is remarkable. Russell's vision of an ever opening and expanding concept of heaven portrays this as an ever richer reservoir of Christian expression with regard to our central hope: a reservoir which indeed has a shoreline, a limit, which is partly visible, but which expands off into an ever unknown horizon. This conception allows different 'correct' views of the afterlife, or perhaps a continuing succession of appropriate views of heaven for particular human contexts. Lindbeck perceives these as different propositional doctrinal expressions of the same underlying rules of theological grammar concerning LAD (see 'Doctrine Tested in the Ordinary' page 33). In other words, the fact that expressions of the afterlife change over time is by no means an indication of something insubstantial, but can actually be quite the opposite.

Carole Zaleski argues that imagination has a key role in eschatology. She believes Cullman and others have failed to grasp 'the principle of "development of doctrine" in eschatology', and have not appreciated 'the varieties of the eschatological imagination'. What such critics 'gain in consistency, they lose by cutting Christian eschatology off from its imaginative roots, from its links to the past, and from its relevance to popular religious longings.'<sup>243</sup> David Brown sees a modern decline in visions of heaven: they have become meagre and dry, and while there are complex reasons for this, he suggests the key factor is 'a simple failure of imaginative nerve'. He warns that, 'Because we are now aware of the considerable extent to which such descriptions of the society of heaven mirror the

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<sup>242</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 17.

<sup>243</sup> Zaleski, *The Life of the World to Come*, 13.

concerns of the writer's own day, it is easy to jump to the negative conclusion that this is all that they do.' Brown argues that the church is mistaken in so easily retreating from imaginative descriptions of the afterlife, because despite their faults they 'clarify what Christianity in fact offers as its ideal of society when wholly directed by Christ. That is a matter of no small moment if it is indeed true that the humanity Christ has in heaven remains, like ours, essentially social.'<sup>244</sup>

Richard Bauckham argues that hope is 'an imaginative enterprise' and we need to think about an eschatological future in terms other than a simple extrapolation of the past and present. But this is not fantasy: 'Christian hopeful imagining is grounded in the promise of God and resourced by the images of the scriptural revelation.' It is also 'inspired by *the* event of eschatological promise', the resurrection of Jesus. It is also characterised 'by its relevance to the way Christian life now is lived'.<sup>245</sup> Bauckham and Hart argue that contemporary society needs to rediscover the 'irreducibly imaginative' Christian hope. Eschatological imagining is much more than factual reference or straightforward description, it is rather 'the deliberate and sometimes striking and discomfiting development and conjunction of ideas and pictures drawn from this world but presented now starkly in ways which correspond to no this-worldly experience.'<sup>246</sup> Bauckham and Hart believe that 'resurrection is in origin not a concept, but an image.' The NT images of resurrection are themselves exercises in eschatological imagination: Paul gives us images to express what cannot otherwise be understood, even partially. Theologians then generate other images (rather than explanations of the biblical image); for example, Barth, Moltmann and Pannenburg provide another image in their proposals that we should understand bodily resurrection as 'the raising into eternity of precisely the whole temporal life which the dead have lived.' As with all the other images, it cannot be adequate in itself, but can be of great value in providing an image of how an Alzheimer's sufferer 'will in the resurrection be who she was in the whole of her mortal life, not merely how she finally was at death. That we cannot imagine how

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<sup>244</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 117.

<sup>245</sup> In Walls (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, 680-2.

<sup>246</sup> Richard Bauckham, and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 108.

this literally could be is, of course, beside the point. We cannot imagine what resurrection as such will literally be.’<sup>247</sup>

Ordinary theologians also exercise eschatological imagination. This does not mean it is mere fantasy.

### 4.3 WHAT THESE VIEWS CAN TELL US

As I have shown, there is no clear protestant orthodoxy as such concerning LAD; neither (of course) is there a clear statement of Congregational orthodoxy in this area. However, using relevant protestant creedal statements, doctrine and liturgies, in conjunction with Wright’s view of ‘life after LAD’, I have synthesised a form of protestant orthodoxy for the comparative purposes of this project. By comparison, the ordinary eschatology of this research may seem so unorthodox that it could simply be dismissed as the untutored ramblings of some strange northern Christians. However, this would be greatly to overemphasise protestant orthodoxy with respect to LAD, and greatly to undervalue the relevance of the ‘ordinary voice’. The volume of this particular ordinary voice may be relatively low: this sample of ordinary theologians is numerically small and perhaps unrepresentative. However, it is still clearly audible. Their disclosed views are remarkably consistent, and nearly all of their views can find support, at least to some extent, in one ‘side’ of the relevant, current academic theological debates. In other words, their views are not entirely unique. In fact, some aspects of ordinary eschatology may be considered to be a return to a more traditional view (with regard to the soul, for example).

The non-physicality of the afterlife in ordinary eschatology is the key point of difference from the ‘norm’. There is no future final physical resurrection, or new earth and heavens. The final afterlife state is an immediate, conscious, social, soul-spirit existence. The soul is substantial, providing the mechanism for continuation of personal identity: the view of human being is therefore dualist. So clear is this conviction of a non-physical afterlife that a radical interpretation of Jesus’ resurrection follows. Ordinary eschatology generally accepts that this was a physical (bodily) resurrection, but considers it a necessary proof to convince the disciples and others that Jesus was the Son of God, rather than an indication of what their own afterlife will be like.

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<sup>247</sup> Bauckham and Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, 126.

When stated in summary form like this, ordinary eschatology can seem surprising. However, the stark contrast between the physical ('orthodox') and the non-physical ('ordinary') is much less apparent when it is noted that ordinary eschatology expects elements of earthly physical experience to be (somehow) available in the non-physical afterlife. Rather than two extreme poles, the physical and non-physical views are better conceived as positions on a continuum. The issue is the extent of transformation, of difference, between this world and the next. Wright is keen to emphasise continuity with this world to comply with what he regards as biblical teaching, and to ensure that Christians in this life do not have an over-heavenly outlook that distances them from the joys and responsibilities of the present Kingdom of God. These ordinary theologians are keen to emphasise discontinuity, although not completely because they see an obvious need for physical-like characteristics in the next life. This 'ordinary' emphasis is not based on their longing to escape this life, however, but rather on their clear understanding of the drawbacks of this physical life. Wright fails fully to appreciate the force of the common human experience of ageing with its attendant decline and ill health. It is also clear that emphasis on the physical leads, in the minds of ordinary theologians, to significant logical and practical problems the solutions to which can seem as fantastic as any non-physical afterlife.

This ordinary eschatology also finds significant support within the current academic debates (philosophical and biblical). Rejection of the substantial soul is a recent phenomenon within protestant theology and is by no means universally accepted. Ordinary eschatology considers the substantial soul to be the obvious explanation of both how this life is experienced, and how I can still be 'me' in the next. It is also the way that personal integrity and continuity can be understood when mind-robbing diseases such as dementia strike. Wright would undoubtedly claim that ordinary eschatology is non-biblical. However, there simply is no consensus regarding the interpretation of key LAD texts such as 1 Cor.15. Competing and contradictory opinions abound, some of which would lend support to this ordinary eschatology. Furthermore, even if it were accepted that Paul clearly meant a bodily 'spiritual' resurrection, and that he envisaged the recreation of the physical earth and heavens, this can be challenged by our total change in

world views.<sup>248</sup> What may have been a reasonable conclusion for Paul, with his understanding of a small (worldly) and young physical creation, may not be reasonable for us who now know of an almost infinite, complex physical cosmos, which has existed for an almost unimaginably long period of time. God's actions at 'the end of the world' surely look different from this perspective; although paradoxically, some physicist-theologians seem not to see this. The imminent conclusion that Paul probably expected, for a small and young creation, has become the almost eternally prolonged evolutionary progress of an immense cosmos. In the light of this, our conception of the afterlife must surely change.

I am not arguing that this ordinary eschatology should simply be accepted in its entirety as the new orthodoxy. I wish to claim only that there is good reason to take it seriously. If ordinary theologians have been Spirit signal processing at all, and I have suggested the means to assess whether this is the case, then the church and academy need to hear their results. The strength of this 'ordinary voice' depends on several things. There is the matter of 'volume': the voice of 26 ordinary theologians is clearly not as loud, in one obvious sense, as the voice of 26 thousand. Consistency is also important here: 26 voices saying the same thing has a much greater impact than the same number of people saying several different things. If ordinary theology were taken more seriously then perhaps the church could seek actually to hear its true (and possibly very substantial) volume across all denominations. The strength of the ordinary voice also relates to the extent to which it differs from the theological 'norm', and the extent to which it finds support in current theological debates. If the results of ordinary theology were *entirely* different from the theological norm and found no support in current debates, then it is possible, but unlikely, that it could be the result of Spiritual discernment. In such situations the obvious implication could be that the church and academy may well need to reconsider how it conveys orthodox theology to ordinary Christians, rather than to reconsider completely such orthodoxy. However, where the results of ordinary theology differ from the norm in key aspects, but still finds support in current theological debates, then it is more likely that the guidance of the Spirit is being reflected. In such situations, church and academy should allow these views to contribute to the discussions. This data

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<sup>248</sup> See Appendix H, pages 230ff.

suggests that the relatively small voice of this ordinary eschatology falls into the latter category.

The potential benefit of listening to such an ordinary voice has, I believe, already been realised and demonstrated within this project. As part of this project I obviously needed to look at the relevant literature and theological debates in detail. This began as a process of expanding my own understanding in these areas, and providing a theological norm for the critique of this ordinary theology. As the ordinary eschatology emerged more fully from the interviews, I began to identify support for and opposition to these views from within the debates. A surprising and important development followed from this: I found myself in a creative ‘hermeneutic spiral’, fuelled by the ordinary eschatology that was being disclosed to me. I was no longer just checking the literature to critique these ordinary views (by identifying points of support and opposition), but I was also using the ordinary eschatology to critique the debates: and each influenced the other in a continuing process. So, for example, I have moved from a position where I simply took it for granted that the afterlife must be physical, following a probably unconscious interim period, to one in which I can increasingly see the reasons why a physical afterlife is problematic. Similarly, I have reassessed the monist positions on human being and have moved toward a dualist position. I suggest that this is precisely the benefit that ordinary theologians, as Spirit signal processors, can provide to the church and academy. *Ordinary theology can provide real stimulus to re-examine and reassess existing assumptions within ongoing theological debates.*

If ordinary views are ignored, then potentially damaging disjunctions can appear between ordinary Christians and ecclesial and academic authority. McDannell and Lang argue that the ‘modern’ view of heaven is still popular, with many Christians hoping for reunion with their loved ones. However, in the contemporary church, ‘hoping to meet one’s family after death is a wish and not a theological argument. While most Christian clergy would not deny that wish, contemporary theologians are not interested in articulating the motif of meeting again in theological terms.’<sup>249</sup> I have suggested that protestant ‘orthodoxy’, including Wright, is not as theocentric as McDannell and Lang suggest. Nevertheless, the warning about such disjunctions remains pertinent.

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<sup>249</sup> McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 312-3.

## 4.4 FURTHER IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH AND MINISTRY

### ***‘Ordinary’ Teaching and Learning***

A clear message from this project is that ordinary theologians seem to learn more by testing in practice ways of Christian living and belief, rather than by seeking to understand (in mental isolation) new propositional truth.<sup>250</sup> These ordinary theologians believe *in* things, not just *that* things are such and such. My limited data suggests that church and academy may have failed to communicate to recent generations of Christians an appropriate understanding of biblical interpretation, and any appreciation of doctrinal development via continuing revelation within a living tradition. These ordinary theologians are highly sceptical of academic or ecclesial authority in such areas, seeing the views of church and academy as merely ‘their opinion’. This suggests that the ways in which such academic and ecclesial views are arrived at are seen by those in the pews as completely dissociated from themselves; something done apart from them and without them. The clarion call of Wright for a right biblical and doctrinal understanding of LAD will therefore not be heard clearly by such people: his seeds of propositional correction will fall mainly on stony ground.

The church, at all organisational levels, needs better to appreciate the disjunction between what is ‘taught’ in doctrine, sermons, liturgy and ritual, and what is actually learned. For example, what those attending funerals actually understand by the ritual is, in my experience, often very different both to what the officiant intends, and to what the church understands by the liturgy. Is the intended effect of liturgy ever tested against its actual reception by those in the pews? Should draft liturgy be ‘trialled’ in this way? This project has demonstrated that what *I* think people are learning from my sermons and Bible study/discussion groups is not necessarily what they actually are learning. I have no doubt that the

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<sup>250</sup> Jeff Astley, ‘Aims and Approaches in Christian Education’, in Jeff Astley (ed.), *Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 2-3, defines Christian education broadly, the aim being to learn Christianity not just *about* Christianity. This is based on a wide view of ‘education’: ‘*learning* is a more or less permanent change in a person brought about by experience (and is therefore to be distinguished from changes in a person’s *development* through intellectual or physical maturation)’. So learning is not limited to *cognitive* learning, but ‘also includes the learning of manual and intellectual skills, and of attitudes, values, emotions and dispositions.’ We learn all the time, from all sorts of experiences; and in the context of church, this is especially important to recognise. Ordinary theologians do not just learn from sermons and formal educational settings.

same is true for clergy colleagues across the denominations. My schoolteacher friends know, of course, that it is good practice to check what is being learned. This simple lesson seems generally to have evaded the church.<sup>251</sup> Surely we need to know what our congregations actually think and believe before attempting to facilitate further learning; and surely we need to know what they actually think and believe after we have done so.

The ordinary theology of our church members represents a great, but largely untapped, resource for more effective education in the church. Furthermore, the process of articulating their ordinary theology can itself be a rewarding and ‘deep’ learning experience for ordinary theologians; and also for the clergy-researcher. In this project this happened not just through the one-to-one interview itself, but also by further personal reflection of the interviewee outside of the interview, and by the sharing of views with others. This overall process helped ordinary Christians to clarify, and even articulate for the first time, their own beliefs on key issues of the lived faith. I believe the listening-conversational process may also have enabled them to do so in a positively critical way, and perhaps helped change them from being ‘unlearning religious people’.<sup>252</sup>

I intend to apply some of these insights in following up this project with my own congregation.

- i. I will disseminate these results and create the opportunity for further discussion of LAD, and further reflection on their experience of this research process. In doing so I will seek both to consolidate and build on their new self-understanding as ordinary *theologians*.

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<sup>251</sup> See Roger L. Walton, ‘Assessment in Adult Christian Education’, in Astley (ed.), *Learning in the Way*, 90-112; Alan Rogers, *Teaching Adults* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), chpt. 11, ‘Evaluation: How can we tell ...?’, 254-70; Stephen D. Brookfield, *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), chpt. 11, ‘Evaluating Learning and its Facilitation’, 261-82.

<sup>252</sup> This is the phrase used by John Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (London: SCM, 1985). Hull’s remedy for this is Christian learning that is critically open and that enables adult learners to construct their own self-critical system of beliefs. Such a viewpoint also has a strong emphasis on the cognitive element of Christian education, but in the sense of critically evaluating knowledge claims rather than simply accepting new (or old) doctrinal claims. However, I am not implying here that the theological method of this project is to be restricted to what Astley calls ‘Critical Christian Education’. I would suggest that I have also used the ‘Interpretation’ model within Astley’s typology of contemporary approaches to Christian education. See Astley, ‘Aims and Approaches in Christian Education’, in Astley (ed.), *Learning in the Way*, 17-26. It is interesting to note here the strong similarity between Thomas Groome’s plan for Christian education (which Astley uses as the representative ‘Interpretation’ approach – page 25) and the ARCS TAR methodology outlined in Appendix E page 181.



- ii. I have already begun to adapt funeral liturgies and will seek to ‘trial’ these (that is, to seek detailed feedback on how they would perceive such liturgy at a funeral service) with some who have taken part in this project.
- iii. I will seek to develop a streamlined process for the ‘ordinary’ consideration of further issues such as euthanasia and assisted dying, and atonement. Clearly, any further processes of articulating ordinary theology cannot be as resource intensive as this one, but the main ‘listening’ and ‘clarifying’ benefits should be preserved wherever possible. Initially I will explore a group method rather than further one-to-one interviews.

### ***The Need for More ‘LAD talk’***

A clear finding of this project is the disjunction between the feeling of these ordinary theologians that more talk about LAD within church and society is desirable and beneficial, and their reluctance to engage in such talk. Death in England has become ‘unnatural’, an unsuitable topic for ordinary conversation, an experience to be hidden behind hospitals and professionals. Views of life after death have also become matters of personal choice, which should not therefore be imposed upon others, even (or especially) in bereavement situations. The church is well placed to resist this trend, and to help articulate the common experience of death in our country where ‘mourners and others are actors without any lines, participants in a drama without any parts to play.’<sup>253</sup> There is a clear need here which the church can begin to meet.<sup>254</sup>

Walter has written extensively about the effect of contemporary culture on how we understand and deal with human death. He argues that the taboo about death has turned into the personalised postmodern death obsession, an interesting process of ritual reinvention where the ‘I did it my way’ approach (Sinatra’s ballad, now a popular choice for funeral music) is becoming the norm. Walter claims that people now not only have to confront their own death, but also to *construct* a death ‘out of the fragments of ideologies and religious sentiments with which our culture provides us.’<sup>255</sup> This is radically new – ‘In all previous societies

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<sup>253</sup> Young and Cullen, *A Good Death*, 204.

<sup>254</sup> See John Swinton, and Richard Payne (eds.), *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End of Life Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) for examples of how Christian ‘LAD talk’ can be of great value.

<sup>255</sup> Walter, *Revival of Death*, 36.

there were *shared* norms as to how to die and how to mourn.<sup>256</sup> For Walter, this new situation is the logical conclusion of western individualism where religion has lost its authority in such matters. Philippe Ariès shows how death and mourning, together with its rituals and visible representations, have become hidden in modern society - the unpalatable reality that contradicts the pretence of a non-mortal self.<sup>257</sup>

Jupp points out that the location of death has changed greatly, limiting our direct experience of dying and corpses: most of us now die in the institutionalised setting of hospital or care homes, only one in six die at home. He also argues that the way in which dying and corpses are dealt with influences how people understand and seek to make sense of death; for example, the commercialisation of funerals has had a significant effect on how we deal with death. 'In Britain, currents of social and cultural change have affected our lives and institutions and also the British way of death.'<sup>258</sup> Walter points to 'the "invention" of bereavement', by which he means 'the shift of focus from the soul of the deceased to the feelings of survivors, and declining value given to theological expertise in eschatology compared to the increasing value given to expertise in the psychology of grief.'<sup>259</sup>

Young and Cullen conclude that all the bereavement post-death situations they observed were lacking something critical, 'the presence of a wider community, of people and of spiritual as well as material support.' They identified four main needs: that funerals should be more personal and focused on the deceased; that support should be extended well beyond the funeral; that continuity between the dead and the living should be established; and that death can regenerate mortality. Death is not instant: a sociological view shows that it is a lengthy business. 'The bereaved whom we saw were recovering their dead and holding on to them, not so much because they wanted to as because they had to.'<sup>260</sup> Young and Cullen point to a specific church which has thrived because it has adopted a vigorous death ministry, offering personal support before and after

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<sup>256</sup> Walter, *Revival of Death*, 2.

<sup>257</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>258</sup> Peter C. Jupp (ed.), *Death Our Future: Christian Theology and Pastoral Practice in Funeral Ministry* (London: Epworth, 2008), 8.

<sup>259</sup> Walter, *Eclipse of Eternity*, 117.

<sup>260</sup> Young and Cullen, *A Good Death*, 190.

the funeral, and using lay people who have gone through bereavement themselves and wanted to share their experience. They also argue that death is the ultimate common experience of human life, which ‘can generate the mystical unity with other people which transcends the boundaries of the body and the self.’ Even the churches ignore the ‘perpetual fund of goodwill’ which death generates; even the churches seem to have forgotten that ‘by supporting the dead, they support the living; that ritual is a method of demonstrating fellow-feeling; that the structure of morality is in good part spun out from the vigour it can get from death.’<sup>261</sup>

I will be considering how my own church can more fully recognise this and improve our support for the bereaved. This will include seeking to make ‘death talk’ a more regular conversation topic within the church community.

#### 4.5 FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further empirical study of the views of other ordinary theologians concerning LAD would clearly be desirable. The ordinary eschatology of Christians from other denominations and contexts would show if this data is representative. A particularly interesting comparison would be with Roman Catholic ordinary theologians.

The strength of scepticism regarding claims to authoritative biblical interpretation also suggests a need for further research. How do ordinary theologians actually understand the Bible and church doctrine? How and where do they seek guidance? Can the ‘ordinary interpretation’ of the Bible be disclosed systematically to church and academy, and applied to current theological debates?

Further research concerning the positive Christian theological learning experiences which seem to result from this kind of ‘listening-conversational’ project would be of benefit in understanding how better to realise the potential of ordinary theology and ordinary theologians.

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<sup>261</sup> Young and Cullen, *A Good Death*, 201-2.

Finally, the issue of euthanasia and assisted dying was raised by ordinary theologians: it was not part of the interview schedule but nevertheless formed a lengthy and engaging part of the group meeting. This suggests, first, that the question of euthanasia and assisted dying follows directly from discussion of LAD; and, second, that it is an issue that people want to consider. It seems to me that it is an ‘elephant in the room’ for contemporary church and society.<sup>262</sup> I strongly suspect that research into the ordinary theology of euthanasia and assisted dying would demonstrate another clear disjunction from the existing church ‘norm’. It may well be a situation where Spirit signal processors could be leading, rather than following, the church.

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<sup>262</sup> See Paul Badham, *Is There a Christian Case for Assisted Dying? Voluntary Euthanasia Reassessed* (London: SPCK, 2009) for a recent attempt to place this issue firmly on the Christian agenda.

## APPENDIX A - EXISTING EMPIRICAL DATA ON LAD BELIEF

A number of major surveys and studies have included relevant questions about LAD. Comparisons between and amalgamation of different data sets is notoriously difficult (owing to their different methodologies, populations, times and places, phrasing of questions, interview technique, etc.), but nevertheless it can provide useful information for understanding further some of the results of this research.<sup>263</sup> It can also provide relevant insights into common areas, and was helpful in forming the range and nature of my own interview schedule.<sup>264</sup>

The think tank THEOS commissioned a survey<sup>265</sup> in 2008, the press release highlighting the key finding as ‘Over half of Britons believe Jesus rose from the dead.’<sup>266</sup> Fieldwork was carried out in February 2008, and the key question (for my purposes) was: *Q4. What do you believe about life after death?* People were asked to indicate AGREE, DISAGREE, or DON’T KNOW for each option. The key group from my point of view are the 90 people (out of a total sample size of 1107, i.e. 8% – 42 male, 48 female) who self-described themselves as ‘Christian regularly attending church’. The results were as follows.

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<sup>263</sup> Robin Gill shows how such data may be combined in a longitudinal way to produce meaningful information. See his *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 70ff.

<sup>264</sup> For example, the Rural Church Project findings on the sense of presence of the dead encouraged me to explore this issue within the interview schedule. See Davies, Watkins, and Winter, *Church and Religion in Rural England*.

<sup>265</sup> Data and tables downloaded March 2008 from

<http://www.comres.co.uk/resources/7/Social%20Polls/Theos%20EasterTables%20March08.pdf>

<sup>266</sup> Theos Press Release 20 March 2008, from <http://www.eauk.org/media/theos-press-release.cfm>

OPTION	AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW
I believe that I will go to heaven when I die	68 76%	10 11%	12 13%
I believe we are judged after death on the way we have lived our lives	69 76%	12 14%	9 10%
I believe in a physical resurrection	38 42%	34 38%	18 20%
I don't believe in a physical resurrection but I do believe that your spirit lives on after death	45 50%	39 43%	6 7%
I believe that death marks the end of human existence	20 22%	57 63%	13 14%
I believe in reincarnation – After death I will be reborn into another body	5 6%	64 71%	21 23%

There are marked gender differences in the *overall sample* as shown below,<sup>267</sup> but the report does not allow gender differentiation in the above 'Christian' sample.

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<sup>267</sup> The following table shows the % of respondents of each gender opting for the particular response to each question.

OPTION	AGREE male	AGREE female	DIS- AGREE male	DIS- AGREE female	DON'T KNOW male	DON'T KNOW female
I believe that I will go to heaven when I die	113 21%	187 32%	203 38%	143 25%	216 41%	246 43%
I believe we are judged after death on the way we have lived our lives	150 28%	207 36%	229 43%	176 31%	152 29%	193 34%
I believe in a physical resurrection	44 8%	51 9%	332 62%	324 56%	155 29%	201 35%
I don't believe in a physical resurrection but I do believe that your spirit lives on after death	174 33%	308 54%	206 39%	113 20%	152 29%	155 27%
I believe that death marks the end of human existence	250 47%	201 35%	133 25%	205 36%	148 28%	169 29%
I believe in reincarnation – After death I will be reborn into another body	57 11%	92 16%	296 56%	231 40%	178 34%	253 44%

In relation to beliefs concerning LAD, Davies and Shaw<sup>268</sup> in their mammoth survey of 1995 sought to explore the beliefs of their respondents using questions devised, tested and administered successfully in the earlier Rural Church Project study of religion in Britain. Interviewees were shown a card and asked ‘which, if any, of the views on this card accord with your own attitude to life after death?’ (Q21).<sup>269</sup> The fixed options were:

*Nothing happens, we come to the end of life.*

*Our soul passes on to another world.*

*Our bodies await resurrection.*

<sup>268</sup> D. J. Davies, and A. Shaw, *Reusing Old Graves: A Report on Popular British Attitudes* (Crayford: Shaw & Sons Ltd., 1995).

<sup>269</sup> Davies and Shaw, *Reusing Old Graves*, 92.

*We come back as something or someone else.*

*Trust in God all is in God's hands.*

The results are shown below.<sup>270</sup> An individual could choose as many options as she or he wished, so the table shows the percentage *of the total responses* gained by each category.

Soul passes on	546	34.1 %
End of life	461	28.8 %
In God's hands	348	21.7 %
Reincarnation	195	12.2 %
Resurrection	126	7.9%
Don't know	145	9.0%
Some other idea about the afterlife	23	1.4 %

However, 79 % of the total sample opted for just one of these responses, ‘so we may see the above table as a moderately good sketch of popular attitudes to the afterlife’<sup>271</sup>. When these responses were analysed by Christian affiliation, the following results were obtained.<sup>272</sup>

Religion	End of Life	Soul passes on	Resurrection	Reincarnation	Trust in God
Church of England	32%	33 %	4%	14 %,	17 %
Roman Catholics	14%	48 %	18 %	11%	32%
Church of Scotland	22%	35 %	6%	6%	31 %
Methodists	30%	26 %	–	6%	30%

The gender differences seen in the THEOS survey are in general agreement with the Davies/Shaw findings, although these are not as marked in some categories.<sup>273</sup>

<sup>270</sup> Davies and Shaw, *Reusing Old Graves*, 92, table 8.09.

<sup>271</sup> Davies and Shaw, *Reusing Old Graves*, 92.

<sup>272</sup> Davies and Shaw, *Reusing Old Graves*, 93, Table 8.11 Afterlife Belief and Christian Groups.

<sup>273</sup> Table from Douglas Davies, ‘Contemporary Belief in Life after Death’ in Jupp and Rogers (eds.), *Interpreting Death*, 138.



BELIEF	MALE	FEMALE
Soul passes on	37%	63%
Life ends	61%	39%
All in God's hands	38%	62%
Come back as something	37%	63%
Resurrection	45%	55%

Davies uses previously unpublished data from the 1995 survey to show the complexity of afterlife beliefs, for example as held by those describing themselves as atheist or agnostic. He warns that such results 'show that beliefs are complex and do not necessarily follow the neat assumptions often held in explicit philosophical positions.'<sup>274</sup> The strong positive response to belief in a soul surviving death, the significant reincarnation response, and the substantial minority of those within Christian denominations who indicated that death was final, all lead to another caution. 'Formal theology is not, however, always reflected in the popular religion of active church members, let alone the wider public who may attend church only periodically.'<sup>275</sup> Of particular note is the low Anglican response to resurrection, only 4% supporting the idea of the body waiting for this afterlife outcome. It is worth quoting Davies at length here, given the central importance of this theme for the Tom Wright view:<sup>276</sup>

This is an important observation and well worthy of comment given the importance of the idea of the resurrection of Christ and of ordinary believers in the Creed and in the basic theology of the Church of England. Whilst it cannot simply be assumed that the idea of the resurrection and of a resurrection body are clearly intelligible to all, it might be expected that the very word 'resurrection' would evoke a response in people's own grammar of faith when responding to survey questions about life after death. Yet this seems not to be the case. Belief in a soul and in a broad trust in God seem to cover the basic Anglican grasp of life after death.<sup>277</sup>

In fact, the Anglican response to reincarnation was far greater than to resurrection.

<sup>274</sup> Davies, 'Contemporary Belief', 133.

<sup>275</sup> Davies, 'Contemporary Belief', 134.

<sup>276</sup> Appendix D sets out the view of Tom Wright concerning LAD. The importance of this viewpoint for the current project is explained in 1.4 Assessing the Theological Contribution of Ordinary Theologians' page 39.

<sup>277</sup> Davies, 'Contemporary Belief', 135.

Davies also uses previously unpublished data from the 1995 survey to explore the sense of presence of the dead. Approximately 35% of respondents claimed such an experience, with a very distinct gender bias toward women. Davies suggests two important things here. First, that the gender bias can be explained largely by the demographic fact that husbands/men tend to die at a younger age than wives/women, hence many of these experiences are claimed by women who have sensed the presence of a loved one in a domestic setting. Second, the high level of belief in LAD may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that experiences of sensing the dead are largely positive and seem to reinforce ideas of an afterlife for those who experience them.

A major survey of Anglican views was conducted with *Church Times* readers in 2001, and subsequently analysed by Francis, Robbins and Astley.<sup>278</sup> Two issues of the paper (March and April) included the questionnaire, and 9,000 responses were received, which was reduced to a final sample of 7,611 Anglicans in England who attended church at least once per fortnight (5,762 lay people, and 1,845 clergy). The survey identified three doctrinal areas (beliefs about God, Jesus and LAD) where the orthodoxy of Anglicans was assessed. The analysis identifies five ‘fault-lines’ between clergy and laity, between lay men and women, between older and younger lay people, between catholic and evangelical clergy, and between charismatic and non-charismatic clergy. The first three are most relevant to this research, and within these the first two themes of ‘patterns of belief’ and ‘patterns of truth’ are most significant. Key overall findings include that 78% affirm the physical resurrection of Jesus and only 6% deny this; 88% affirm belief in LAD, but 2% reject this and 10% are agnostic; 79 % believe that heaven really exists, 4% reject this and 17% are agnostic; 46% believe that hell really exists, 20% reject this and 34% are agnostic. Consequently, ‘the image which they carry of life after death may be at some variance with the historic creeds.’<sup>279</sup> It is also clear that committed Anglicans do not see the Bible as the only source for their faith, tradition remains important. 70% reject the view that the Bible is without error, and 62% argue that biblical truths are culturally conditioned. While the benefits of the traditional practices of Bible reading and

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<sup>278</sup> Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, and Jeff Astley, *Fragmented Faith: Exposing the Fault-lines in the Church of England* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005).

<sup>279</sup> Francis, Robbins, and Astley, *Fragmented Faith*, 31.

prayer are strongly affirmed, there is much less enthusiasm for Bible study groups and prayer groups.<sup>280</sup>

In relation to the ‘fault-lines’, the following information emerges. Clergy are more orthodox than lay people with regard to LAD, being more committed to the belief itself and to a real heaven and hell. But clergy are much more comfortable with the notion of biblical truth being culturally conditioned.<sup>281</sup> There is little gender difference with regard to orthodoxy of belief or understanding of religious truth among lay people.<sup>282</sup> However, there were significant differences among age groups. Younger Anglicans (defined as less than 50 years of age) are more orthodox in their beliefs about God and Jesus. With respect to LAD, however, there was little difference.<sup>283</sup> Evangelical and catholic clergy differ greatly over the reality of hell, and significantly over the reality of heaven and belief in LAD itself. Catholic clergy are also much less likely to uphold the inerrancy of Scripture. ‘Overall, the fault-line between catholic and evangelical clergy concerning the grounds of theological truth is strongly developed and very pronounced.’<sup>284</sup> Also significant and profound is the difference between charismatic and non-charismatic clergy, the former being much more committed to a real heaven and particularly a real hell.<sup>285</sup> While this data might at first seem less at odds with Wright’s view than that outlined previously, the clear differences between clergy and between clergy and laity present real issues for him.<sup>286</sup>

Of the more general social surveys, the European Values Survey (EVS) is most relevant, containing a number of questions around the issue of LAD. Longitudinal analysis and comparison across countries is possible. This data shows, in Britain, a persistent high level of belief in God, heaven and soul; a fairly high level of belief in LAD; and significant belief in hell, reincarnation and

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<sup>280</sup> Francis, Robbins and Astley, *Fragmented Faith*, 32-3.

<sup>281</sup> Francis, Robbins and Astley, *Fragmented Faith*, 52.

<sup>282</sup> Francis, Robbins and Astley, *Fragmented Faith*, 65.

<sup>283</sup> Francis, Robbins and Astley, *Fragmented Faith*, 82.

<sup>284</sup> Francis, Robbins and Astley, *Fragmented Faith*, 102.

<sup>285</sup> Francis, Robbins and Astley, *Fragmented Faith*, 119. Such differences between clergy are confirmed in a cross-denominational context by an analysis of the afterlife beliefs of new churches in York. The bulk of these churches can be described as ‘evangelical-charismatic’ and have a strikingly ‘old fashioned’ conceptualisation of life after death. David Goodhew, ‘Life Beyond the Grave: New Churches in York and the Afterlife’, in Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (eds.), *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul: Papers Read at the 2007 Summer Meeting and the 2008 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Woodbridge : Boydell Press for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 2009).

<sup>286</sup> Appendix D sets out the view of Tom Wright concerning LAD.

resurrection. The following table uses the summary data of Walter<sup>287</sup> plus data from the EVS 1999/2000 dataset (release 2, May 2006).<sup>288</sup> The data is partial in that the question set is not consistent over time.

% believing in	1968	1981	1990	1999
God	77	76	71	61
heaven	54	57	53	46
soul		59	64	
LAD	38	45	44	45
hell	23	27	25	30
reincarnation	18	27		
resurrection			32	

The General Social Survey (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Centre (NORC) at Chicago University conducts basic scientific research on the structure and development of American society and has in the past asked some interesting questions regarding the specific nature of an afterlife.<sup>289</sup> In 1983 and 1984 the interviewer, in response to a positive or undecided answer to the question, ‘is there life after death?’ said, ‘of course, no one knows exactly what life after death would be like, but here are some ideas people have had.’ The interviewee was then given a card showing a number of ideas and was asked to say how likely she felt each possibility to be: very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not likely at all? The results are as follows (percentage of respondents responding in this way to each question):

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<sup>287</sup> Walter, *Eclipse of Eternity*, 32-3, table 2.1.

<sup>288</sup> Data from <http://zocat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp> (3 December 2009).

<sup>289</sup> from <http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website/Browse+GSS+Variables/Subject+Index/> (3 May 2010).

Afterlife Idea	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not too likely	Not likely at all
A life of peace and tranquillity.	67	28	4	1
A life of intense action.	13	28	39	19
A life like here on earth, only better.	30	31	22	18
A life without many things which make our present life enjoyable.	22	27	29	22
A pale, shadowy form of life, hardly life at all.	5	13	29	52
A spiritual life involving our mind but not our body.	48	31	9	12
A paradise of pleasure and delights.	37	31	22	11
A place of loving intellectual communion.	55	36	7	3
Union with God.	81	17	2	1
Reunion with relatives.	73	21	4	2

Although this data is not directly applicable to British culture, it nevertheless provides an interesting insight into how some people viewed the nature of the afterlife. In the years 1986-89 a series of similar questions were put in the form of contrasting images, with the interviewee being asked to place themselves in this contrast within a range of seven positions (1 meaning total support for image A, 7 meaning total support for image B). The results appear to show that LAD was expected by these people to be: probably better than life on earth but possibly without many things which make earthly life enjoyable; very probably a spiritual life (mind not body) rather than a sensual life of pleasures; much more likely to be a peaceful life rather than one of intense action; and very probably a more fulfilling life than a pale shadowy life.

## APPENDIX B - EXCURSUS ON CHURCH DOCTRINE CONCERNING LAD

There are two issues here: the peculiar situation of the Congregational churches with respect to doctrine as such; and a notable lack of clarity in protestant LAD doctrine.

### CONGREGATIONALISTS AND DOCTRINE

This study has been conducted within a Congregational church, a denomination which traditionally does not adhere to the practice of requiring subscription to creeds and is suspicious of anything which could undermine local authority. The available written resources for conducting sacraments and other services within Congregational churches are not compulsory, and give only a very simple statement of faith in relation to church membership.<sup>290</sup> The suggested order for the induction and ordination of ministers is more comprehensive with regard to statements of faith, which are clearly recognisable as being related to the creeds but are entirely non-creedal in format.<sup>291</sup> However, we are a federation of churches who recognise the need to understand both our own faith tradition and those of our fellow Christians. The website of the Congregational Federation gives this statement of ‘what we believe’.<sup>292</sup>

Generally, Congregational churches have a broadly orthodox faith commitment, believing in God as a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is believed the Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who has uniquely revealed to humanity as much of His nature as they are able to accept. It is held that Jesus died on the cross to reveal fully the length to which the love of God goes, and that he rose from the tomb on the third day after his crucifixion.

By His death on the cross, it is held that full atonement is made for the sins of humankind. God accepts that sacrifice and is willing to forgive us.

It is believed the Holy Spirit is powerfully available to those who place their trust in God, and that He is present in worship and witness.

Doctrine is not an alien concept and the traditional creeds are known by many. The role of tradition is substantial, if not explicit, for most Congregationalists. Shortly after the formation of the Congregational Union in 1831, it adopted (in May 1833) a ‘Declaration of the Faith, Church Order, and

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<sup>290</sup> Cleaves *et al.*, *Patterns for Worship*, 312.

<sup>291</sup> Cleaves *et al.*, *Patterns for Worship*, 363-85.

<sup>292</sup> See <http://www.congregational.org.uk/section.aspx?id=265>

Discipline' of the church.<sup>293</sup> This document states in its introductory comments that the churches of the Union

wish it to be observed, that, notwithstanding their jealousy of subscription to creeds and articles, and their disapproval of the imposition of any human standard, whether of faith or discipline, they are far more agreed in their doctrines and practices than any Church which enjoins subscription and enforces a human standard of orthodoxy; and they believe that there is no minister and no church among them that would deny the substance of any one of the following doctrines of religion, though each might prefer to state his sentiments in his own way.

Among the stated doctrines of religion are the following:

XV. They believe that the Scriptures teach the final perseverance of all true believers to a state of eternal blessedness, which they are appointed to obtain through constant faith in Christ, and uniform obedience to His commands.

XVII. They believe that the sanctification of true Christians, or their growth in the graces of the Spirit, and meetness for heaven, is gradually carried on through the whole period during which it pleases God to continue them in the present life, and that, at death, their souls, perfectly freed from all remains of evil, are immediately received into the presence of Christ.

XIX. They believe that Christ will finally come to judge the whole human race according to their works; that the bodies of the dead will be raised again; and that, as the Supreme Judge, He will divide the righteous from the wicked, will receive the righteous into 'life everlasting', but send away the wicked into 'everlasting punishment'.

The link to the Savoy Declaration of 1658 (which is identical with the 1646 Presbyterian Westminster Confession in relation to the doctrine of LAD) is obvious. The key chapter of the Savoy Declaration is chapter 31, 'Of The State of Man After Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead'. Here it is stated that:

1. The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies: and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day: Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.
2. At the last day such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed; and all the dead shall be raised up with the self-same bodies, and none other, although with different qualities, which shall be united again to their souls forever.

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<sup>293</sup> Printed in Albert Peel, *These Hundred Years: A History of the Congregational Union of England & Wales 1831 – 1931* (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1931), 69-74.

3. The bodies of the unjust shall by the power of Christ be raised to dishonour; the bodies of the just, by his Spirit unto honour, and to be made conformable to his own glorious body.

What is perhaps most striking from these historical Congregational statements is the clear expression of the life of the soul after death, with the Savoy Declaration talking specifically of the soul ‘having an immortal substance’. There is an interim stage of conscious soul-existence,<sup>294</sup> and of course (post-Reformation) there is no purgatory. A final bodily resurrection is also clear. It is perhaps remarkable to note how clearly Calvin defended the concept of a soul and its immortality,<sup>295</sup> arguing that this is proven from the testimony of conscience, knowledge of God, the noble faculties with which it is endued, its activity and wondrous fancies in sleep, and innumerable passages of Scripture. The image of God, for Calvin, is one of the strongest proofs of the immortality of the soul. The image of God is in the soul and its nature may be learnt from its renewal by Christ. Plato is favoured among the philosophers for his correct identification of the soul as immortal, and Calvin is clear that the soul is an incorporeal substance.

Moreover, having already shown from Scripture that the substance of the soul is incorporeal, we must now add, that though it is not properly enclosed by space, it however occupies the body as a kind of habitation, not only animating all its parts, and rendering the organs fit and useful for their actions, but also holding the first place in regulating the conduct.<sup>296</sup>

However, it would be stretching credulity to believe that ordinary Congregationalists of today have been influenced by doctrinal documents and arguments such as those above. They are far more likely to have some awareness of the creeds used in the Church of England or of Catholic teaching on the matter.

## CREEDS AND ANGLICAN DOCTRINE

The Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds are widely used by the Church of England in their liturgies. However, these key Christian creeds actually say little about LAD. In order, the relevant extracts are:

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<sup>294</sup> Calvin’s *Psychopannychia* (‘the soul awake’), written in 1534 and first published in 1542, argues against the two errors of the soul sleeping after death in an insensible state (the ‘slumberers’), and the soul dying and being resurrected with the body (the ‘mortalists’). Calvin saw the soul as immortal and being in a continuing relationship with God so that it could receive gifts not received during this life.

<sup>295</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 1, chapter 15.

<sup>296</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 1, chapter 15, section 6.



### APOSTLES' CREED<sup>297</sup>

he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

### NICENE CREED<sup>298</sup>

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

### ATHANASIAN CREED<sup>299</sup>

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man: so God and Man is one Christ.  
Who suffered for our salvation: descended into hell, rose again the third day from  
the dead.

He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty:  
from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies: and shall give account  
for their own works.

And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done  
evil into everlasting fire.

Other than these creeds<sup>300</sup> (and the expression of doctrine within funeral  
liturgy – see Appendix C), Anglican Christians can look to the 39 Articles (1571,  
compulsory in 1662 Conformity), the Ordinal (not in 1980 ASB or *Common*

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<sup>297</sup> *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House, 2000), 141.

<sup>298</sup> *Common Worship*, 173.

<sup>299</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (in section 'At Morning Prayer').

<sup>300</sup> Further 'Authorised Affirmations of Faith' are specified in *Common Worship*, 144ff.

*Worship*), the Revised Catechism,<sup>301</sup> and most recently the 1996 Doctrine Commission report, *The Mystery of Salvation*. Stephen Sykes comments, in the composite volume which contains this report, that ‘These are documents with a pastoral concern, and, because of this, stand close to the Church’s public teaching of the faith.’<sup>302</sup> However, ‘They are not an Anglican systematic theology, but they teach the faith from within the Church of England, attempting to discern a faithful and true pathway for the contemporary disciple.’<sup>303</sup> He claims the reports are written in a ‘semi-popular’ style, but even as someone with considerable theological training I did not find it easy to find clear summaries of key issues.

It is interesting that both John Polkinghorne and Tom Wright were members of this commission. Their influence can be clearly seen. The adoption of Polkinghorne’s redefinition of the soul as a ‘complex information-bearing pattern’ surely provides little further clarity in a key area of common concern and confusion.<sup>304</sup> We are later assured that on death we are (our pattern is) ‘remembered’ by God.<sup>305</sup> This strikes me as a rather weak and unattractive expression of hope for ordinary Christians, and suggests echoes of process theology. The same may be said of the Polkinghorne view of how the matter of this creation is to be re-used in the eschaton, a view which sounds too scientifically transient to form doctrinal foundations.<sup>306</sup> The voice of Wright can be seen in the emphasis on bodily resurrection, from a particular interpretation of 1 Cor. 15; and a renewed cosmos, the ‘new heavens and new earth’, from a particular interpretation of Romans 8 and Revelation 21. To this reader the report contains too many attempts at being all-inclusive. There are a number of occasions where a variety of differing views are brought together, perhaps more in order to be seen to be inclusive rather than from any motive of clarity of thought. The treatment of hell and damnation illustrates this point.<sup>307</sup> Universalism is rejected, but then partially endorsed by saying that ultimately only we can exclude ourselves from God’s salvation. Hellfire and damnation is

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<sup>301</sup> *The Revised Catechism as Authorised by the General Synod of the Church of England* (London: SPCK, 1989).

<sup>302</sup> Church of England Doctrine Commission, *Contemporary Doctrine Classics: The Combined Reports by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), xv.

<sup>303</sup> Church of England Doctrine Commission, *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, xvi.

<sup>304</sup> Church of England Doctrine Commission, *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, 287.

<sup>305</sup> Church of England Doctrine Commission, *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, 427.

<sup>306</sup> Church of England Doctrine Commission, *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, 430.

<sup>307</sup> Church of England Doctrine Commission, *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, 433.

rejected for moral and ethical reasons, but then accepted by redefining them as the awful state of those who finally cannot accept God's salvation.

I could not find any clear doctrinal statement regarding LAD on the Church of England website ([www.churchofengland.org](http://www.churchofengland.org)), nor did I find clear reference to other sources for such information. The Revised Catechism is less than comprehensive:

**59 What are we to understand by the last judgement?**

By the last judgement we are to understand that all men will give account of their lives to God, who will condemn and destroy all that is evil, and bring his servants into the joy of their Lord.

**60 What are we to understand by resurrection?**

By resurrection we are to understand that God, who has overcome death by the resurrection of Christ, will raise from death in a body of glory all who are Christ's, that they may live with him in the fellowship of the saints.

**61 What, then, is our assurance as Christians?**

Our assurance as Christians is that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thus, daily increasing in God's Holy Spirit, and following the example of our Saviour Christ, we shall at the last be made like unto him, for we shall see him as he is.

By contrast, the Catechism of the Catholic Church,<sup>308</sup> as with their funeral liturgy (see Appendix C), provides much clearer and more comprehensive doctrinal guidance: dealing in detail with such issues as the origin and nature of the soul, the meaning and significance of Jesus' resurrection, and the resurrection of the body (including the obvious and common objections that people raise against this doctrine). I say this as a Reformed Minister, standing at the other side of the Reformation, who disagrees with some of this guidance. My point is rather to admire the availability and clarity of expression therein, compared to my own church and the national protestant church. The protestant churches seem to have little of substance and clarity with which to guide our own faithful concerning LAD. The rather important question of 'what happens to us when we die' either seems to have found little common ground for agreement and doctrinal statement in the protestant denominations, or it has not been communicated to the ordinary protestant faithful in any effective way.

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<sup>308</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Popular and Definitive Edition* (London: Burns & Oates, 2008).

## APPENDIX C - A MINISTER REVIEWS HIS OWN THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

Before exploring in detail the ordinary theology of members of my congregation, it was important that I become more aware of my own beliefs and practice concerning LAD. I had kept full service notes of all funerals I had taken since 1987, but had never reviewed them systematically. I therefore undertook such a review, with the following results.

I have never used the word ‘soul’ in a funeral service, except incidentally via the reading of Psalm 23, and have never used Wisdom 3:1. I have rarely used the word ‘heaven’, preferring instead ‘the afterlife’ or ‘life with God after death’. My most often used passages of Scripture are Romans 8 (never separated from God) and Revelation 21 (wiping away tears from eyes). In the context of my funeral services, the first has undoubtedly suggested an immediate, post-mortem, personal relationship with God and protection and comfort by him; the second, a final peaceful resting place where all the problems of this life are taken away (although this passage is a picture of a new physical city, the message as given and received in funerals is actually metaphorical and non-physical). I have also infrequently used Mt. 11:28, again implying a peaceful rest after death.

The service books I have used over this period are equally illuminating. *Patterns for Worship*<sup>309</sup> has no mention of soul other than in the Wisdom 3 reading, and the committal wording is ‘we have entrusted our brother’ (i.e. the whole person, as we knew him). It also uses ‘in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ’, but in my experience this has actually been received and interpreted by those attending funeral services as an immediate state of continuing ‘spiritual’ life, rather than a delayed physical re-embodiment. In the introduction to the service we are assured that ‘death is not the end; that Christ has faced it and fought it and conquered it, so that – *name* – can go where he is leading us all, to be welcomed in the arms of his grace.’<sup>310</sup> Again, this suggests an immediate and peaceful state of continuing non-physical life. The service book of the United Reformed Church which I have used (now updated) does not mention soul except within optional Bible readings (but

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<sup>309</sup> Cleaves *et al*, *Patterns for Worship*, 480-81.

<sup>310</sup> Cleaves *et al*, *Patterns for Worship*, 474.

Wisdom 3 is not included). The commendation prayer gives thanks for the life of *N* ‘whom we commit into your care and keeping’ or ‘whom today we commend into your sure keeping’ or ‘entrust ... to your merciful keeping’,<sup>311</sup> all of which implies the immediate transference of the non-physical person to the afterlife. The ‘empty’ body in a coffin is displayed clearly to the gathered relatives and friends of the deceased, and in the adjacent room the furnace equipment is ready to destroy this body literally to ashes. I have conducted only two burials in my whole ministry: cremation is the norm in my experience and Davies is surely right to point to a link between cremation and belief in a continuing soul rather than a physical resurrection.

What cremation allows to come to the forefront is the otherwise strongly implicit belief in a human soul which leaves the body and continues into another dimension of existence at death. The traditional burial service focuses on the body and its resurrection future. While the modern cremation service explicitly follows that pattern its implicit message is that the body has come to its end but the soul has gone on. The only hope that many can read into the cremation service is the hope of a surviving soul. Even though it is sometimes argued that as far as God is concerned it is as easy to resurrect an individual from a myriad of ashes as from a single grave this point carries little weight at the popular level of thought.<sup>312</sup>

In his work with older Aberdonians, Williams found that ‘the trend to cremation does not depend on indifference to the spiritual survival of the dead. On the contrary, the body is often devalued in order to emphasise the spirit.’<sup>313</sup>

The funeral service books provided at the crematoria in my area are those produced by the Joint Group on Funeral Services at Cemeteries and Crematoria. I have most often used the original 1986 first edition of this publication, but I compare this below with the most recent 2009 fourth edition. The 1986 service has two interesting aspects. First, in the commendation options (which is prefaced by ‘entrust our *brother N* to the mercy of God’ – that is, the whole ‘spiritual’ person) we get a very strong suggestion of final reunion with those we love (not those whom God loves). Option 1 has ‘so that at the last we may be one with those whom we love in thy presence’, and option 2 has ‘so that, at the last, we

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<sup>311</sup> *A Book of Services: The United Reformed Church in England and Wales* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1980), 94-5.

<sup>312</sup> Davies, *Cremation Today and Tomorrow*, 33.

<sup>313</sup> Rory Williams, *A Protestant Legacy: Attitudes to Death and Illness Among Older Aberdonians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 149.

may come, with all whom we have loved, to that abiding city where you reign'.<sup>314</sup> Second, in the options for the final prayer, there is a suggestion of a two-stage process, i.e. a 'sleep' and a final future event. We have 'that in the last day, when you gather up all things in Christ', and 'now rests in the sleep of peace, ... grant to him and all who rest in Christ, refreshment, light, and peace', and 'by whose mercy and grace your saints remain in everlasting light and peace'.<sup>315</sup> This probably reflects ecumenical influence on this publication, and offers options not present in the Congregational Federation (CF) and 1980 URC liturgies. In the CofE 'modern language' service (from the 1980 ASB) there is little difference, but in the CofE 'traditional language' service there is a much clearer articulation of the soul and a 2-stage process. We find in the prayers, 'Almighty God, with whom do live the spirits of them that depart hence in the Lord, and with whom the souls of the faithful, after they are delivered from the burden of the flesh, are in joy and felicity: ... that we ... may have our consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in thy eternal and everlasting glory.'<sup>316</sup> Also, that 'when we depart this life, we may rest in him, as our hope is this our *brother* doth; and that, at the general resurrection in the last day, we may be found acceptable in thy sight.' Equally obvious is that we suddenly get soul in the committal – 'We commend unto thy hands of mercy, most merciful Father, the soul of this our *brother* (or this thy *child*) departed,'<sup>317</sup> The clearest mention of judgement in the 1986 CofE services is in the 'traditional' service – 'Enter not into judgement with thy servant, O Lord'.<sup>318</sup> The 'modern' service refers only to the Lord being 'justly angered by our sins' in a Committal option.<sup>319</sup>

As might be expected, the 1986 representation of the RC funeral rite is much more explicit with regard to both the soul and a two-stage process culminating in physical resurrection. The deceased person 'has fallen asleep in the peace of Christ.'<sup>320</sup> Prayers at the graveside make clear the separation of body and soul until a final resurrection day: 'Grant, we pray you, that your servant may rest at peace in this grave until that day when you, the resurrection and the life, enrich

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<sup>314</sup> *Funeral Services of the Christian Churches in England* (Norwich: the Canterbury Press, 1986) [by the Joint Group on Funeral Services at Cemeteries and Crematoria], 12.

<sup>315</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 17.

<sup>316</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 44.

<sup>317</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 49.

<sup>318</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 43.

<sup>319</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 32.

<sup>320</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 57.

him (her) with life made new.’ Also, Jesus has risen from the dead and broken the bonds of hell, ‘to save all believers and bring about the resurrection of their bodies.’<sup>321</sup> When the coffin is taken out of the chapel to go to the grave, the following may be said – ‘May the Angels lead you into paradise, and Martyrs welcome you as you draw near and lead you into Jerusalem, the heavenly city’<sup>322</sup> (which seems to confuse the order of things?). There is nothing similar in prayers and readings for those cremated in the RC rite, but a rather stunning final prayer in which Mary is asked to ‘commend to her Son the soul of his servant who had departed this life, that through her maternal intercession, *he (she)* may quickly reach *his (her)* longed-for home in the heavenly fatherland, and live for ever and ever’<sup>323</sup> (implying a doctrine of purgatory?).

The most recent 2009 publication of the Joint Group on Funeral Services provides some interesting contrasts.<sup>324</sup> It contains an updated JLG service, the new *Common Worship* service of the CofE (2000), and the new Catholic Funeral Rites from the *Order of Christian Funerals* (1990). Trevor Lloyd, commenting on the process of and motivation for revision to the CofE funeral services which resulted in the 2000 *Common Worship* liturgy, sees a welcome return to an earlier ‘continuum’ concept of the funeral, where a ‘theme of movement and journeying from one place to another, reflecting the pilgrimage of the whole of the Christian’s life’ is key.<sup>325</sup> So the new liturgy provides a comprehensive series of services and resources enabling pastoral response to all aspects of the death and grieving process. Also, it is ‘more overtly Christian’ than the preceding ASB service, this being the intention of the Commission to the House of Bishops who stated that ‘The basic rite is a Christian rite for Christians. We believe that it should be possible to have the same basic rite for all, and not one service for church members and one for others. Hence the basic structure is eucharistic.’<sup>326</sup> By this Lloyd means, that, in contrast to the minimalist 1552 Cranmer service ‘with no Communion and no need even to go into church’, we now have a service which becomes ‘empty-tomb and heavenly banquet-centred rather than coffin-

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<sup>321</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 61-2.

<sup>322</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 59.

<sup>323</sup> *Funeral Services* (1986), 61.

<sup>324</sup> *Funeral Services of the Christian Churches in England* (Norwich: the Canterbury Press, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2009) [by the Churches’ Group on Funeral Services at Cemeteries and Crematoria].

<sup>325</sup> Trevor Lloyd, ‘The Church of England’s *Common Worship* Funeral Services’, in Jupp (ed.), *Death Our Future*, 160.

<sup>326</sup> Lloyd, ‘The Church of England’s *Common Worship* Funeral Services’, 163.

centred. It moves in a “normal” way to a eucharistic climax and, at that moment, conscious of the open door between heaven and earth, we move on to the Commendation and Farewell, followed by the Committal.’<sup>327</sup>

Within the crematoria service book, the 2009 version of the CofE ‘modern language’ service is indeed noticeably different from the 1986 version. It has an obvious structure, with the new elements of an Introduction, Prayers of Penitence, and Collect. Judgement is clearer, both with the prayers of penitence and the introduction stating that we commend the deceased ‘to God our merciful redeemer and judge’.<sup>328</sup> There is also the new statement in one of the committal options that our Lord Jesus Christ will ‘transform our frail bodies, that they may be conformed to his glorious body’.<sup>329</sup> However, this optional phrase is far from an unambiguous statement concerning physical resurrection. The impression remains from this service that the afterlife is immediate, peaceful, restful and spiritual or non-physical.

The 2009 JLG service has more modern language than the 1986 version, a clearer introduction, and a completely new end section ‘Prayers For Our Continuing Journey Towards Heaven [sic]’. There is less emphasis on reunion, the shorter Commendation options mentioning only being received ‘into the glorious company of the saints in light’,<sup>330</sup> and no indication of a two-phase process (no ‘sleep’, for example). The final section of prayers reinforces the impression of an immediate, everlasting, and peaceful state of LAD. They are quite remarkable in this respect, including, from Newman, ‘the fever of life is over and our work is done, ... grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at last’; and from Milner-White, ‘dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling ... no noise nor silence ... no fears nor hopes ... no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity’.<sup>331</sup> The question is not so much what was actually meant by the author of these prayers, but rather the way in which they are likely to be understood at a funeral; which is surely that the afterlife is an immediate, peaceful, and therefore spiritual state. By contrast, there is the clearer statement in the second Opening Prayer, ‘As we rejoice in the promise of resurrection’.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Lloyd, ‘The Church of England’s *Common Worship* Funeral Services’, 164-5.

<sup>328</sup> *Funeral Services* (2009), 27.

<sup>329</sup> *Funeral Services* (2009), 37.

<sup>330</sup> *Funeral Services* (2009), 16.

<sup>331</sup> *Funeral Services* (2009), 20-1.

<sup>332</sup> *Funeral Services* (2009), 4.



Overwhelmingly my purpose in funerals has been focused on the bereaved rather than the deceased. I have tried to help them better cope with grief, and to be confident in the promise of eternal life which is proclaimed by the Christian gospel. My funeral addresses have consistently made the point that the ‘whole’ person, by which I mean not just as they were when they died (often elderly and in poor health for some time) but rather their entire lived life, is now in God’s hands and will be made whole in new life.<sup>333</sup> In this way I have tried to say that illness and handicap will be removed and all stages of life will be restored. I have encouraged people to remember all aspects of the life of the deceased, and to think of this whole person-experience as now being with God. I have never preached that they are in a ‘sleep’ state, waiting for resurrection, because I have not thought this a scriptural or comforting message. I have also, at least tacitly, implied that there is an immediate reunion with others who have preceded them in death; and have never directly raised the issue of judgement (rather implying a universalism based on the overriding premise of a God of love).

Funeral liturgies give to the ordinary Christian member, and the many nominal Christians who attend such services, a confusing picture of what happens when we die. It is hardly surprising that ordinary Christians reach a variety of conclusions and opinions about LAD. The resources of the Reformed tradition that I have used in funeral services are poor in terms of biblical imagery, and hardly touch on key questions involving the relationship between body and soul, any two-stage process, final physical resurrection, or family reunion. However, even the updated CofE services, which must surely be used at the majority of funerals in this country, are less than clear as to our final destiny.

Tony Walter and Guy Cook have compared the language of contemporary and traditional Anglican services, setting this against the sociological background of the decline of ritual and the rise of individualised and personalised funerals.<sup>334</sup> They argue that the weakening of religious certainty results in a concentration on the life and character of the deceased and on what has been lost by those grieving

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<sup>333</sup> I now realise this has strong echoes with the views of Gregory of Nyssa concerning how in our resurrection each ‘single man will become a crowd of human beings, so that with his rising again there will be found the babe, the child, the boy, the youth, the man, the father, the old man, and all the intermediate persons he once was.’ Quoted in Ted Peters, ‘Resurrection: The Conceptual Challenge’, in Peters, Russell, and Welker (eds.), *Resurrection*, 311.

<sup>334</sup> Guy Cook, and Tony Walter ‘Rewritten Rites: Language and Social Relations in Traditional and Contemporary Funerals’, *Discourse Society* 16, no. 3 (2005), 365-91.

her, rather than her future beyond death. 'Greater religious certainty allows the traditional service to look towards the future: both the immediate grim physical decomposition, and the later glorious physical resurrection, references to which have significantly declined in contemporary versions despite an attempt to reaffirm the physical resurrection in *Common Worship* compared with versions of the previous three decades.'<sup>335</sup> Walter has proposed a new sociological model of grief,<sup>336</sup> rather than the old emotional-psychological one.

With increasing individuation, with serial monogamy and with mobility separating the bereaved from friends and family, it is particularly important for the funeral to state who this person was. To have a public, and accurate, biography told in the funeral may help mourners find an enduring place for the deceased in their lives – not least because the recounting of it there gives them permission to continue their own recounting in the weeks and months ahead.<sup>337</sup>

But, of course, the assumption of a clear and direct link between what a funeral liturgy says and what is understood and believed by those attending is highly suspect. It will come as no surprise to anyone who has performed Christian rites (of baptism, marriage, communion, funeral, church membership) that the rite is capable of multiple interpretations. D. J. Davies talks of 'dual-purpose rituals' in which the officiant and participants can have very different views of exactly what is taking place in the rite.<sup>338</sup> Collins finds that there are numerous ways of interpreting a ritual (he uses the example of a Quaker meeting); and that the interpretations of the participants themselves must be taken into account as well as those of anthropologists.<sup>339</sup> If I were to ask the members of my congregation to express what they had understood by the funeral I had just conducted, I would expect to receive a range of views quite different from what I thought I was doing, or indeed to any 'official' theology of the rite. Ministers and priests can benefit from advice on how to make funerals meaningful to those attending, that is, on how to reinterpret and re-present the traditional rite in a way that 'connects' with the experience and pre-understanding of those attending.<sup>340</sup> But multiple meaning of ritual is not simply a phenomenon of postmodern suspicion, or one of the

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<sup>335</sup> Cook and Walter, 'Rewritten Rites', 376.

<sup>336</sup> Tony Walter, 'A new model of grief: bereavement and biography', *Mortality* 1, no. 1, (1996) 7-25.

<sup>337</sup> Walter, 'A new model of grief', 22.

<sup>338</sup> Douglas Davies, *The Theology Of Death* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 55.

<sup>339</sup> Peter Collins, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a "Ritual"', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, no. 3 (2005), 323-42.

<sup>340</sup> Kelly, *Meaningful Funerals*.

consequences of secularisation; it is an inherent characteristic of ritual itself. Ritual has the power to convey a depth of meaning beyond what can be defined by propositional logic, an observation which should make any minister or priest think of the ‘space’ she leaves in worship for such experience. ‘It may be that clergy learn much theology in a formal way, but many other people of varying degrees of faith learn their religion through practical involvement; this is why it is important to have forms of religious service which encode Christian truth in ways which may be acquired by participants.’<sup>341</sup> Practice is key to understanding a religion, particularly as expressed in ritual. ‘Practice produces policy, rites yield popular theology. This is why symbols are important since they are vehicles for thought.’<sup>342</sup> The powerful symbol of cremation implies a non-physical soul-spirit afterlife. Davies borrows (from Talal Asad) the phrase ‘untaught bodies’ to portray a generation of people who have never been exposed to the ‘bodily teaching’ of attending worship, singing hymns, participating in ritual etc.<sup>343</sup> Walter talks of the ‘ritual incompetence’ of mourners, a generation of people who don’t know how to sing hymns or to be quiet during prayer, or when to stand and sit, which makes the clergy role in modern funerals more difficult.<sup>344</sup>

Paul Sheppy points to the inherent problem of any Christian service book, which must ‘assume (to a greater or lesser degree) a Christian understanding of what is to happen. In an increasingly secular society this draws attention to the gap between what the texts take for granted and what the person in the pew apprehends.’ Rehearsing some long held opinions, he states that ‘A funeral service is not always an unequivocally good example of user-friendliness. Much of what is said must sound strange – even alien – to those who hear it.’<sup>345</sup> (For example, the priest/minster saying ‘to the One who is able to keep you from falling’ as the coffin is lowered into the grave.) What Sheppy is concerned about (in contrast to Wright) is not so much correct doctrine, or accurate propositional statements of truth concerning the afterlife, but rather the pastoral situation of people facing death and grief. Ewan Kelly recognises this also in his argument for

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<sup>341</sup> Davies, *Cremation Today and Tomorrow*, 20.

<sup>342</sup> Davies, *Cremation Today and Tomorrow*, 10.

<sup>343</sup> Davies, *Anthropology*, 42.

<sup>344</sup> Walter, *Revival of Death*, 34. So clergy are judged on their ‘personal touch’ because the death rite has become primarily a celebration of the life of the deceased. In this sense Walter argues that *discourse has replaced ritual*, discourse with a close friend or family member, or with a ‘self-help’ group, or a counsellor. The self is discovered by talk, religion is replaced by spirituality.

<sup>345</sup> Paul P. J. Sheppy, ‘Free Church Liturgies’, in Jupp (ed.), *Death Our Future*, 185.

the need for funerals in contemporary society to be co-authored between the theological specialist or wordsmith and the bereaved.<sup>346</sup> He calls for church representatives to act creatively as facilitators of theologising, to re-form meaningful ritual around death, while maintaining theological integrity (the funeral to be shaped and informed by the Easter story<sup>347</sup>). The funeral can and should be an opportunity for the church truly to help others in a time of great need. ‘The bereaved are not looking for answers from a church representative but an opportunity to give vent to what is a deep and heartfelt desire to try to make sense of what has happened and why.’<sup>348</sup>

In my experience, Sheppy is quite correct in saying that ‘Some mourners are acutely sensitive to the least infelicity of expression, and one detail may colour their recollection and, indeed, the effectiveness of the entirety. ... What, of course, happens in practice is that in most cases the minister and the mourners negotiate a mutually acceptable “halfway house”.’<sup>349</sup> As a working Christian minister I clearly recognise this place, the halfway house between, on the one hand, apparently ‘pure’ Christian doctrine and ‘correct’ Christian liturgy, and on the other, the real pastoral needs of people under the care of the Christian church. It is not that I am seeking to make my life easier in funeral contexts by avoiding the clear ‘truths’ of Christian doctrine concerning LAD; it is rather that I am not sure that such certainty exists, and even if it did, whether it should simply be proclaimed irrespective of the likely effect on the hearer.<sup>350</sup> Neither am I sure that the link between what I proclaim in a funeral rite, and what the congregation hears and understands, is either certain or clear. Surely our pastoral practice as Christian ministers in bereavement situations is at least as important as our proclaimed theological position?

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<sup>346</sup> Kelly, *Meaningful Funerals*, 127.

<sup>347</sup> Kelly, *Meaningful Funerals*, 141.

<sup>348</sup> Kelly, *Meaningful Funerals*, 126.

<sup>349</sup> Sheppy, ‘Free Church Liturgies’, 186.

<sup>350</sup> Rowan Williams says death is surrounded by clichés – ‘many a priest engaged in a bereavement visit will have discovered the extraordinary importance of saying or allowing to be said a whole range of what might look “objectively” like empty bromides.’ *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 75.

## APPENDIX D - THE TOM WRIGHT VIEW OF ‘LIFE AFTER LAD’

Wright’s reforming views are set out in a variety of publications, including his impressive volume on the resurrection of Jesus. He has also published a Grove pamphlet aimed at a wider non-academic church audience,<sup>351</sup> a small book focusing on the celebration of All Saints Day,<sup>352</sup> and a work on the nature of Christian hope.<sup>353</sup> Wright, of course, comes at the issue of LAD from a biblical perspective. In defending the bodily resurrection of Jesus as the proposal which ‘possesses unrivalled power to explain the historical data at the heart of early Christianity’,<sup>354</sup> he also clearly exposes the New Testament view of what happens to a Christian when she dies. Wright believes that a significant ‘correction’ is required in the way that Anglican (and other) clergy and church members understand and communicate this because we have had a liberal drifting away from biblical truths. He has become

increasingly aware of a mismatch between what the earliest Christians believed about life after death – and about resurrection as a newly embodied life *after* ‘life after death’ – and what many ordinary Christians seem to believe on the subject today. ... I have come to the conclusion that what we do and say in church at this point is increasingly at odds with anything that can be justified from the Bible or earliest Christian traditions.<sup>355</sup>

Wright disparages popular (ordinary theology?) views of LAD.

Christians regularly speak of their hope in terms of ‘going to heaven when they die’. One hears it in hymns; one finds it in prayers – not least (in my tradition) in liturgical prayers, but also when people pray extempore. One hears it in sermons, both explicitly and implicitly. The point seems to be that there is something called ‘eternity’, which is regularly spoken of as though it has only the loosest of connections with space and time, and one day we are going to step into this eternal existence, whether in the form of heaven or of hell, which has almost nothing to do with this earth and this present history. I suggest that this view, widely held though it is, is far less warranted by the New Testament than would normally be supposed; that it can be at the very least seriously misleading, and at worst quite positively damaging to a healthy Christian faith; and that it should be challenged by a more biblical picture altogether. I suggest instead that

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<sup>351</sup> N.T. Wright, *New Heavens: New Earth – The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2nd ed., 2006).

<sup>352</sup> N.T. Wright, *For All The Saints? Remembering the Christian Departed* (London: SPCK, 2003).

<sup>353</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007).

<sup>354</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 718.

<sup>355</sup> Wright, *For All The Saints?*, xii.

what we find in the New Testament, and what I commend, is the Christian hope for a new, or renewed, heaven and a new, or renewed earth, with these two integrated together.<sup>356</sup>

It is important to understand what the former Bishop of Durham is saying here with regard to correct thinking and practice. He is assuming that it is possible to arrive at ‘correct’ doctrine which is definitive and applicable in all Christian contexts and times. This clarity can only come from an appropriate study of the biblical evidence, which apparently is capable of a single correct interpretation: this is the meaning intended by the original author in her historical context, which is nevertheless directly applicable to the present historical context. He is further assuming that correct doctrine can and should be encapsulated in correct church teaching and liturgy, and that participation in such liturgy will thereby lead to correct understanding.

Wright is concerned that ordinary Anglicans are apparently mistaken about the nature, timing and location of heaven; the existence of purgatory and hell; the relationship of body and soul; and the definition of soul. These are significant and worrying results of wrong thinking. For example, the ‘steady erosion of belief in hell’ has the result that the church has become unable also to articulate the clear promises of the New Testament about the resurrection of the dead. ‘Indeed, to read what some have written, and observe what some see fit to do liturgically, we have to say that the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to life has been replaced, for many Anglicans at least, by the vague and fuzzy possibility of a long winding journey to somewhere or other.’<sup>357</sup> Purgatory has crept back into Christian currency, evil is not being taken seriously enough, and hell has been taken out of the equation.

For Wright, the timing and nature of post-mortem life is clear from the New Testament. After death we enter immediately a disembodied state of paradise (or heaven), a state of ‘restful happiness’ where we peacefully await the future general bodily resurrection. We are conscious in this intermediate state. The use of the term ‘sleep’ by Paul ‘means that the body is “asleep” in the sense of “dead”, while the real person – however we want to describe him or her – continues.’<sup>358</sup> But what exactly is the real person without a body? Wright

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<sup>356</sup> Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth*, 5.

<sup>357</sup> Wright, *For All The Saints?*, 36.

<sup>358</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 183-4.

denigrates what he sees as the entirely incorrect and non-Christian (Platonic) idea of an immortal soul leaving the mortal body at death, yet is entirely convinced of an *interim* state of non-physical existence. In fact, he permits the use of the word ‘soul’, as long as what is meant by that is ‘a whole human being living in the presence of God.’<sup>359</sup> But what we are in this intermediate state is not entirely clear. Wright accepts the hardware-software analogy of Polkinghorne to illustrate how difficult and vague it is to talk of a disembodied soul, but this adds little by way of clarification.<sup>360</sup>

Wright is clear that there is no purgatory (a Roman Catholic mistake) in this interim existence; but there is still judgement and hell (to come). He is also absolutely clear that the final goal is a new heaven and a new earth joined together, a re-formed world where God is fully present. Such a view prevents us from adopting a too-heavenly theology, where the role and responsibilities of Christians in the present ‘kingdom of heaven’ are undervalued.

In the Grove pamphlet (based on his 1993 Drew Lecture on immortality), Wright makes a comprehensive series of clarifications regarding relevant biblical passages, themes and terminology. The ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ (Matthew) is the same as the ‘Kingdom of God’, that is, not a *place* where you go or where God reigns, but rather the fact that God does rule. Wright suggests it would be better translated as the *Kingship* of God/Heaven. The phrase ‘eternal life’ (from John and Paul) refers not to a timeless existence, but to a new era which God will create at some future point. Heaven is not a future state or place, but rather the hidden dimension of God’s present reality where His purposes are stored up. Salvation comes *from* heaven (God) *to* you; you do not go to a place called heaven. ‘It is rather like a parent, in the run-up to Christmas, assuring a child that “there is indeed a present kept safe in the cupboard for you”. That does not mean that on Christmas Day and thereafter the child is going to have to go and live in the cupboard in order to enjoy the present there.’<sup>361</sup> Being a citizen of Rome did not mean that all such citizens went back to the mother City; rather, it meant that when citizens were in trouble, the Emperor of Rome would come *from* Rome to

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<sup>359</sup> Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth*, 25.

<sup>360</sup> Wright, *For All The Saints?*, 72; *Surprised by Hope*, 175. For Polkinghorne’s analogy and more complete argument of personal survival beyond death see his *The God of Hope*, 105-12.

<sup>361</sup> Wright, *New Heavens*, 7.

deliver them from their enemies. Thus, we do not go to 'heaven', God comes to us (Philippians 3:20).<sup>362</sup>

Wright insists that the scope of the new creation should not be limited, as in such mistaken hymns as Wesley's *Love Divine*. It does not just concern what God does in human beings, but rather involves everything. Paul's great vision in Romans 8 is of the *whole of creation* being set free from its bondage to decay. Furthermore, and again correcting Wesley, being 'changed from glory into glory' is something that happens in the present not the future. 2 Cor. 3:18 refers to the present process whereby Christians, looking at the work of the Spirit in one another, are transformed from one degree of glory into another. Finally, the casting of crowns before God in heaven is not some future event but is happening now. The worship in Revelation 4 and 5 is a present event not a future state: creation worshipping God *now*. The book of Revelation is not a 'Cook's tour' of heaven; rather it is a disclosure of what is true all along in God's dimension of reality. Revelation 21 and 22 is about the final unification of heaven and earth, not about escaping 'up' to a New Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem will in fact come *down* to earth (Revelation 21:10-11).<sup>363</sup>

Resurrection is critical for Wright in several respects. Jesus was physically resurrected, showing that God will renew material existence (an assumption which Wright shares with the scientist theologians Polkinghorne and Wilkinson – see pages 224ff.). Wright points to a Maccabean origin of the idea of resurrection: people who had died serving God must be brought back to life to witness the final victory of the new age of world history which God would bring about.<sup>364</sup> So resurrection is about a renewed world, not continuing individual existence, and resurrection lies in the future. When Jesus says to the brigand, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43), he means the temporary place of rest before rising from the dead. 1 Cor. 15:51-6 speaks of the second of a two-stage process, a future point of general resurrection, when all will be raised. 'Departing and being with Christ' or 'living to God' are New Testament ways of expressing a *temporary* stage ahead of the time when God restores all things.

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<sup>362</sup> Compare Christopher Morse, 'The Virtue of Heaven: from Calvin to Cyber-Talk and Back', *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (2003), 317-328.

<sup>363</sup> David Brown points out that Revelation 21 talks of a 'new heaven and a new earth', but also suggests that the sun and moon are no longer needed. *Tradition and Imagination*, 128, footnote 70.

<sup>364</sup> It is interesting to note that the context of the origin of resurrection is important. In fact, it is context-dependent according to Wright, just as ordinary theology would claim. New contexts mean new truths.



## APPENDIX E – METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH<sup>365</sup>

### AN APPROPRIATE ‘CONVERSATIONAL’ MODEL

This qualitative study seeks to adopt an appropriate methodology of practical theology. Swinton and Mowat suggest that the situation and problem(s) should be established, so that clear research questions can be (eventually) generated. But it is important to understand that qualitative research is different from quantitative and ‘begins with a general field rather than a specific hypothesis. As the research progresses, material for the development of hypotheses begins to emerge.

However, they tend to emerge *from* the data rather than be imposed on it by the researcher. It is therefore both usual and acceptable to pose a general question or to lay out an initial observation which later becomes the general field of study.’<sup>366</sup> Both the field and the purpose may change in response to the data gathered. This has been my experience in this research project, and the eventual clarification of inappropriate (or impossible) research questions has been very helpful.

Woodward and Pattison state that practical theologians ‘must be prepared to engage in inter-disciplinary learning, because the theological tradition does not in itself provide all the information about the modern world that is needed to have a good understanding of many issues.’<sup>367</sup> A recent development of a model for ‘Theological Action Research’ (TAR) sounds a warning here: ‘The practical theologian as practitioner, social scientist, theologian and cultural expert is in danger of becoming an impossible person!’<sup>368</sup> The authors of the TAR model have adopted a team approach as an essential response to this difficulty, that step I consider unnecessary for a project such as this, although I do recognise the limitations on personal competence to which they point.

The usual starting point for practical theology is some sort of theoretical or practical concern that demands attention. It is a kind of *unsystematic* conversation between theory, theology and practice.

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<sup>365</sup> The content of this section has mainly already been examined in an earlier stage of this degree programme, and hence is included as an Appendix here. See 2. Process and Method’ page 43 for a full explanation.

<sup>366</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 52. See also Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 99ff.

<sup>367</sup> Stephen Pattison and James Woodward, ‘An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology’, in James Woodward, and Stephen Pattison (eds.), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 9.

<sup>368</sup> Helen Cameron *et al.*, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010), 26.

Because it continuously has to re-engage with the fragmented realities and changes of the contemporary world and the issues it presents, much practical theology is not systematic or complete. It provides shafts of light into situations and issues rather than final answers or durable solutions. ... This contrasts with some traditional kinds of theology that have claimed to be universally valid, complete, essentially unchangeable and unchallengeable, because of their historic role and authority in the life of the church.<sup>369</sup>

Practical theology also takes the experience of contemporary people with utmost seriousness. Pattison believes we have to set theology free from ‘dusty academic bondage’; it should rather be seen as *contemporary enquiry*.<sup>370</sup> In similar vein, Ballard and Pritchard state that, ‘It is the task of the practical theologian not only to know the Church and the world as it is, but also to stand at that point where the concerns of the Church and the world meet in creative encounter exploring the perceptions of the gospel. That is, the primary task of the practical theologian is to facilitate theological reflection.’<sup>371</sup> Ballard and Pritchard also point to an important characteristic that should be present in a practical theologian, which they designate their *Habitus* model. The word *habitus* is borrowed from Edward Farley, whose work emphasises the importance of developing a correct spiritual and mental disposition within theological endeavour (there are strong links here to Astley’s ordinary theology).<sup>372</sup> Ballard and Pritchard see four models of how theory and practice can be held together, while Graham, Walton and Ward provide a more comprehensive typology of seven models<sup>373</sup> and from a more complete historical perspective. However, this adds little to the argument which Ballard and Pritchard present with clarity. Their four models are: *Applied Theology* (linear and unidirectional, from theory to practice), *Critical Correlation* (dialogue between the tradition and contemporary reality, using other disciplines), *Praxis* (theory is a reflection on practice and arises from committed action, e.g. liberation theology), and *Habitus* (truth is found in the community of shared meaning and is appropriated by growth into wisdom). Ballard and Pritchard claim that these four positions are not mutually exclusive

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<sup>369</sup> Pattison and Woodward, ‘An Introduction’, 14.

<sup>370</sup> Stephen Pattison, ‘Some Straw for the Bricks: A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection’, in Woodward and Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader*, 137.

<sup>371</sup> P. Ballard, and J. Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996), 31.

<sup>372</sup> Farley, *Theologia*, 31, designates a sense of theology as ‘individual cognition of God and things related to God’, which in this sense ‘is a habit (*habitus*) of the human soul’.

<sup>373</sup> E. Graham, H. Walton, and F. Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005).

and that the best features of all can and should be used together in their version of the *Pastoral Cycle*.

The Pastoral Cycle model has clear strengths. It allows experience to be an appropriate and sufficient starting point; it is relatively easy to visualise and understand; it recognises the contribution that other disciplines can make; and it facilitates a systematic approach to complex questions. However, it implies too clear a separation between the various stages of the cycle, and a linear one-way process. Theological reflection can and should be a continuous element. There is also a need to be more aware of our own values and theology when doing a cycle, as well as the philosophical and methodological ‘baggage’ and limitations of other disciplines. Emmanuel Lartey<sup>374</sup> suggests a revised cycle with more feedback, and the structured involvement of others to facilitate ‘*collective seeing*’, but my basic concerns remain. Stephen Pattison offers a more flexible model. ‘The basic idea here is that the student should imagine herself as being involved in a three-way conversation between (a) her own ideas, beliefs, feelings, perceptions and assumptions, (b) the beliefs, assumptions and perceptions provided by the Christian tradition (including the Bible) and (c) the contemporary situation which is being examined.’<sup>375</sup> He recognises that it is important to be self-critical, and like Lartey, he argues that a good way to do this is to work in groups.

Swinton and Mowat see the Pattison model as a good example of the critical correlation type, but have a major concern with this overall approach. They question

whether it is theologically appropriate to give all of the dialogue partners equal weighting within the research process. ... Can the social sciences really challenge theology at a fundamental level as the wider implications of this model would suggest? ... If mutuality truly means that both parties have an equal voice in the research process and that the social sciences can actually override theology on central issues, then the danger of idolatry becomes a real possibility.<sup>376</sup>

So the mutual critical correlation method must be revised to prevent a drift into relativism and a reformed ‘cycle’ is therefore proposed. They say that theology should be present in all stages, but there is still a strong sense in which it remains

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<sup>374</sup> Emmanuel Lartey, ‘Practical Theology as a Theological Form’, in Woodward and Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader*, 128-34.

<sup>375</sup> Pattison, ‘Some Straw for the Bricks’, 139.

<sup>376</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 83.

a basic pastoral cycle, and the additional flexibility of Pattison has been missed. *The issue is the understanding of continuing revelation.* Swinton and Mowat stress the role of experience in practical theology, but also make it very clear that human experience is not a locus for fresh revelation. They want to keep a ‘pure’ gospel, intact and separated off from human historical life. They talk of remaining faithful to the ‘script’ of revelation, a script which cannot be altered or added to. Human experience will not ‘counter or contradict the script provided by Scripture, doctrine and tradition.’<sup>377</sup> However, I would maintain that human experience can and does bring fresh revealed truth, and the human world is the vehicle for continuing revelation. This reflects the way our scriptures actually came into being and were ‘canonised’, and how a living Christian tradition has operated subsequently.

Of course, with any correlational approach, the key issue is ‘that it may lack criteria for giving adequate relative weighting to different sources in the conversation. Presuming that the Bible or tradition has a normative status for the Christian how is that to be evaluated?’<sup>378</sup> In this thesis I set out a clear view of biblical and ecclesial authority, and continuing revelation, and argue that ordinary theology must be *theological* and exposed to critique from the normative tradition.

The recently developed TAR model has an ‘Action-Reflection’ cycle (bearing many similarities to a pastoral cycle) which is intended to be theological at all stages. The primacy of the theological endeavour and the possibility of theological insight are achieved by structured conversation between ‘theology in four voices’.<sup>379</sup> The first of these voices, ‘operant theology’, is based on a key assumption, that ‘Practices of faithful Christian people are themselves already the bearers of theology; they express the contemporary living tradition of the Christian faith.’<sup>380</sup> It is recognised that Astley explores this dimension of theology in a different way as ‘ordinary theology’.<sup>381</sup> Faith practitioners (ordinary theologians) are ‘generally always and already consciously aligned to an

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<sup>377</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 7.

<sup>378</sup> Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 123.

<sup>379</sup> Helen Cameron *et al.*, *Talking About God in Practice*, 50-60.

<sup>380</sup> Helen Cameron *et al.*, *Talking About God in Practice*, 51.

<sup>381</sup> Helen Cameron *et al.*, *Talking About God in Practice*, 14, footnote 14. For a fuller discussion of this issue see ‘The Benefits of Ordinary Theology’ page 18.

articulated theology. This is the “espoused” theology of the group.’<sup>382</sup> Espoused theology may or may not reflect well the actual practice (operant theology) of a Christian; it is rather why they say they do what they do. Such espoused theologies must come from somewhere, so we have both ‘formal’ and ‘normative’ theology. Formal theology is the theology of academic theologians; normative theology is the Scriptures, creeds, official church teaching and liturgies. These four voices (theologies) are distinct, but interrelated and overlapping. The format of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ teams is designed to facilitate productive critical reflection between these four voices. Such ‘conversation’ produces theological insight.

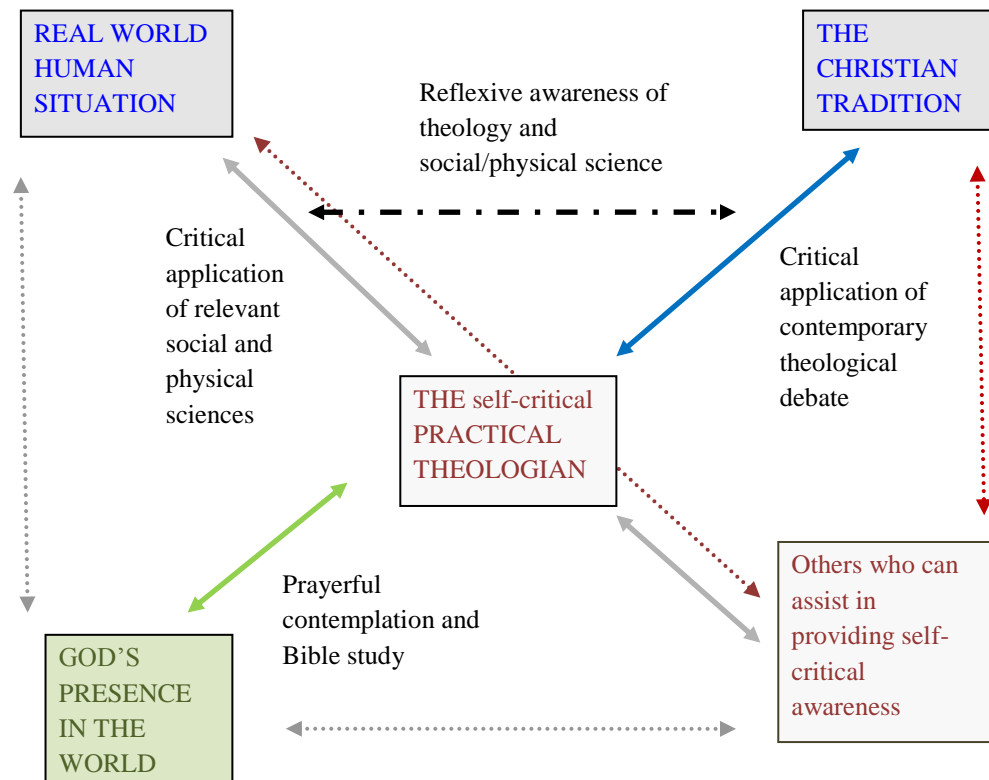
This model is designed for group-based research and the key characteristic of TAR is that the research question is generated by the ‘inside’ group themselves, not by ‘outside’ researchers. It is not therefore directly applicable to the type of qualitative research undertaken in this project. However, the four ‘voices’ are encapsulated in the model below (and indeed in most of the other models of practical theology discussed above). Operant and espoused theologies are the beliefs of ordinary theologians; formal and normative theologies are the Christian tradition and the critical application of contemporary theological debate.

The model I adopt is an adaptation and extension of the Pattison ‘conversation’ idea. In the following diagrammatic representation of my model, the arrows represent a linking process between the elements concerned, and where appropriate this process is made clear. So, the key processes are: use of the relevant social and physical sciences, and critical application of contemporary theological debate, by the practical theologian (and others who assist in providing self-critical awareness – supervisors, fellow students and ministerial colleagues), to the situation and the tradition respectively. The practical theologian (and others in a more general sense) also uses prayerful contemplation and Bible study as a process to further enhance the link with God’s presence and continuing activity. This is not to imply that God is merely one actor among others in this model, but rather to recognise that his very presence in the world influences all human participants. I have also included a process link (reflexive awareness) between the two key processes of the critical application of social sciences and contemporary theological debate. Thus the model incorporates the means by which the

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<sup>382</sup> Helen Cameron *et al.*, *Talking About God in Practice*, 53.

application of theological insight and social science are reflexive, that is, the very application of each approach should inform the other on a continuing basis. This iterative feedback loop is therefore not just about final results but about what is learnt from every stage of the process.



This model recognises and accepts that the Christian tradition (by which I mean theology in the broadest sense, including the interpretation of Scripture) is not a fixed entity, but is itself a changing and dynamic element, both influencing and being influenced by the other elements. The Christian tradition has been influenced by real-world situations in the past and Scripture is capable of numerous ‘correct’ interpretations dependent on the particular human historical context.

## REFLEXIVITY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

This model recognises the subjective viewpoint of all human actors, particularly the theological and cultural predisposition of the practical theologian. So, following Lartey and Pattison, the researcher should have structured dialogue with others, as an important way of checking one’s predispositions and

prejudices. This has happened formally via regular meetings with academic supervisors, periodic peer group feedback within the DThM programme, and informally via consultation with other ministerial and church colleagues. I have also reviewed my own funeral theology and practice (see Appendix C) and have undergone a process of deliberate self-reflection.

The issue of the researcher being self aware of her own biases and pre-dispositions is a critical aspect of all elements and stages of the research project. Swinton and Mowat state that *reflexivity* is ‘the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings.’<sup>383</sup> The researcher has to be sensitive as well as reflexive, ‘While the researcher’s primary task is to describe the encounter, in reality, she is inevitably a co-creator of the mode and content of that encounter.’<sup>384</sup> This is especially the case with interviews, which are not conversations.

However, such (inevitable) personal bias is not a barrier to being able to discover something real and truthful. Epistemologically, I adopt a critical realist position, assuming that truth concerning the social (and physical) world is available to the researcher, and what we can discover by research approximates to, although does not match exactly nor capture entirely, reality. This project involves qualitative research and recognises that both the researcher and the human subjects interpretively construct reality. This is not to say, though, that reality is nothing but a human construction.

Charlotte Aull Davies sets out to provide a workable reflexivity, which she defines as ‘a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference.’<sup>385</sup> She identifies the problem of how to retain the actuality of research on a reality outside ourselves. It is assumed we are connected with the social reality, and therefore influence and are influenced by it within the research process; but is there a reality that can meaningfully be explored? Postmodern critiques can lead to an infinite regress of reflexive thought which leaves us only with the constructed reality of the interviewer-ethnographer herself, ‘the extreme relativism and antipathy to generalised explanation that is essentially destructive of the research

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<sup>383</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 59.

<sup>384</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 61.

<sup>385</sup> Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 4.

enterprise.<sup>386</sup> Davies points to a critical realist alternative which ‘provides a philosophical basis for ethnographic research to provide explanatory (law-like) abstractions while also emphasising its rootedness in the concrete, in what real people on the ground are doing and saying.’<sup>387</sup> Critical realism ‘accepts the reflexivity of the social sciences in the fullest sense’, recognising that the development of knowledge and the development of the object of knowledge are themselves linked.<sup>388</sup> According to Davies, many ethnographers adopt a critical realist approach but do not specifically acknowledge they are doing so. The scientist-theologian John Polkinghorne also promotes ‘critical realism’ from an entirely different perspective. Science is an activity of persons, in communities of practice and belief where theory and experiment are inextricably intertwined. ‘There are no significant scientific facts that are not already interpreted facts.’ There is no universal epistemology, ‘but rather entities are knowable only through ways that conform to their idiosyncratic nature.’ Polkinghorne argues that because we live as created persons in a created world, our minds can discern truth in the physical *and theological and social* reality of the world. While the social world (and the scientific) is not simply ‘there’ for us to read without hesitation or confusion, nevertheless it is real and we can access it at least approximately.<sup>389</sup>

Unlike classical scientific methodology, qualitative research ‘presumes that meaningful knowledge can be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences.’<sup>390</sup> This, of course, raises the question of generalisation. ‘It is true that aspects of human experience are unique and unrepeatable. Nevertheless, there remains a degree of shared experience which we believe can, to an extent, transfer from one context to another.’<sup>391</sup> So despite a small, self-selecting sample (numerically, geographically and denominationally) real knowledge can be gained about the wider world of faith and belief. What we learn from a small group of Congregationalists about how Christians understand LAD will have relevance to other Christian contexts.

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<sup>386</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 25.

<sup>387</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 20-1.

<sup>388</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 21.

<sup>389</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 106-8.

<sup>390</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 43.

<sup>391</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 47.



In Young and Cullen's research on terminally ill patients and their carers, Young provides a stunning reflexive 'Personal Note', where he relates the death of his own wife Sasha during the project. In particular, his continuing experience of Sasha and visions of the dead, are related movingly – 'The dead are dead and not dead. Sasha may have died, but she is certainly not dead, and with this testament I declare to the readers what will already be obvious – that I am very far from being a dispassionate student of dying and of death.'<sup>392</sup> While this is an extreme situation of reflexive awareness, there is also a real sense in which we are all far from dispassionate concerning the contemplation of death and LAD. It touches a core existential nerve, and challenges the religious beliefs and practices of ordinary Christians. I, too, am far from dispassionate about death.

For Swinton and Mowat, qualitative research takes place within an *interpretive paradigm*. The key point is that

for qualitative research the idea of value-free, objective truth becomes at best questionable and perhaps unsustainable. All reality is interpreted and formulated via an interpretive process within which the researcher is inevitably enmeshed. *This is not necessarily a bad thing ... Indeed, the involvement of the researcher is a necessary and constructive dimension of the interpretive process.*<sup>393</sup> [emphasis added]

Swinton and Mowat suggest that reflexivity 'is perhaps *the* most crucial dimension of the qualitative research process.' It is 'not simply a tool of qualitative research, but part of what it actually *is*'. They continue, 'Reflexivity is a mode of knowing which accepts the impossibility of the researcher standing outside of the research field and seeks to incorporate that knowledge creatively and effectively.'<sup>394</sup> Reflexivity should be personal (all research is to an extent autobiographical, about me and my biases, etc.) *and* epistemological (limits of the methodology). 'Rather than seeking after tools and methods that will distance her from the research process, *the researcher becomes the primary tool* that is used to access the meanings of the situations being explored' [emphasis added].<sup>395</sup>

It is vitally important, therefore, to understand the nature of this key tool; where and how it has been formed, what are its key characteristics and capabilities. I have already stated that I am a Christian minister and researcher who is not dispassionate about death. I am also a male, white, middle-aged,

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<sup>392</sup> Young and Cullen, *A Good Death*, xvi.

<sup>393</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 37.

<sup>394</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 59.

<sup>395</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 60.

formally-trained minister who places great emphasis on theological understanding. I have always sought to explain the great elements of Christian faith, to myself and others, and have regarded the ‘teaching’ aspect of my ministry as very important. This is not to say that I disregard the ritual and non-cerebral aspects of faith, but rather that my personal predisposition has been toward the systematic analysis of doctrine and belief. I have also been aware of the gulf, though, between academic theology and the reality of understanding in the pews, and the richness and depth of such non-systematic understanding. In recent years I have been pleased to see the argument gain ground that ‘ordinary’ and ‘practical’ theology are extremely important elements of the overall theological enterprise.

Some members of my congregation may see me as ‘academic’, the ‘theological expert’, despite my efforts over the years to encourage them to value their own theological thinking. It is a most difficult step for older, non-university educated people, to believe they can be practical theologians.

## RATIONALE FOR INTERVIEWING MY OWN CONGREGATION

This research has been conducted as a ‘native’, an ‘insider’. Most of these people at the time of the interviews have been known to me for twenty years, and none for less than three. I have been their minister but, I believe, also their friend and fellow-believer. This is not to say that I am simply one among other members of my church. I have been minister since April 1989, and have fulfilled the full range of pastoral and leadership duties expected of such a role (albeit in a part-time and non-stipendiary capacity). However, my role has probably been less formal than comparative ministries in other denominations for the Congregational ethos stresses lay involvement. Although my primary research tool has been the semi-structured interview, I have in effect also been a ‘participant observer’ (or perhaps better an ‘observing participant’<sup>396</sup>) for many years, and continue to interact with these people in the general context of shared church life. I am not,

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<sup>396</sup> James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler (London: SCM, 1988), 88-9. The term is preferred by Hopewell, using the work of Melvin Williams, ‘because the member is already an insider and accustomed to the values and behaviour that he or she must now study objectively’.

therefore, a ‘professional stranger’<sup>397</sup> but rather a ‘professional friend’, and necessarily adopt an emic (insider) approach.<sup>398</sup>

In order to create deep and rich insights, we need intense and rich conversation – hence in-depth interviews. They are ‘concentrated human encounters, ... designed to enable the researcher to access and understand the unique meanings, interpretations and perspectives that the participant places on the chosen subject.’<sup>399</sup> Like conversations, they are open and dynamic with no clear end point, and they evolve, affecting all participants. However, Swinton and Mowat point to two big differences between interview and conversation. The first is a recognition that the interviewer is in a position of power, having control over the aims and purposes, and the content and conduct of the event.

The interviewee is therefore in a position of vulnerability which the researcher needs to be constantly aware of. ... The interview is a dangerous gift that people offer to the researcher, a gift that can be received, treasured and accepted, or abused, manipulated and implicitly or explicitly discarded. Reflexivity and the recognition of the subtle and hidden dynamics of the interviewer’s relationship to the interviewee are crucial.<sup>400</sup>

The second difference is that interviewing is not counselling. The interviewer should not confuse their role – the point is ‘that counselling is another role, one which the researcher has not been given permission to adopt even though they may be qualified to do so.’<sup>401</sup>

### **‘Power’ in the Interview**

Because of the way in which the reality of the social world is accessed, the nature of the interaction of interviewer and interviewee is critical. A fundamental characteristic of the research interview is that it should be conducted between the participants as equals. C. A. Davies suggests we can understand the interview at three levels: the discourse and text which results; the interaction of interviewer and interviewee which produces and interprets the text; and the social context, i.e. the social conditions that affect both interaction and text. These are inseparable.

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<sup>397</sup>The position advocated by Eileen Barker, ‘Brahmins Don’t Eat Mushrooms: Participant Observation and the New Religions’, *LSE Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1987), 127-52.

<sup>398</sup> See Kenneth L. Pike, ‘Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behaviour’, in Russell T. McCutcheon (ed.), *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1998), 23-7.

<sup>399</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 63-4.

<sup>400</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 65.

<sup>401</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 66.

‘Any differences [*between interviewer and interviewee*] – such as those based in gender, class, age, status – which have implications for differential access to power in the wider society will affect interaction during the interview.’<sup>402</sup> We must therefore be acutely aware of such factors and note their potential effects and ways we may compensate. The interviewer-ethnographer has some control just because of choosing and introducing topics, but ‘a good interviewer needs to be open to the possibility that respondents will not be able to discuss the subject in terms that they suggest.’<sup>403</sup> In my context, this is a caution against assuming theological understanding and articulation on the part of my interviewees.

Peter Collins points to Ann Oakley’s claim that interviewing is a ‘masculine paradigm’ where interviewees are subordinate to the aims and needs of the interviewer.<sup>404</sup> However, he argues that while this may have some credence with respect to a type of interview where an aggressive interrogator extracts information from the captive interviewee, there are other views of what an interview can and should be. Paul Oliver asks the question whether the interviewee gains anything from the interview process.

Many people enjoy being interviewed. It is a process which places interviewees at the centre of considerations. It is their views that matter; their thoughts on issues being recorded, and a research report will be constructed around the data which they provide. It is also a process which enables and encourages interviewees to think out their own positions on complex issues. It is an opportunity to reflect on their values and opinions. There are no real distractions, and for a short period of time, it is their views which really matter.<sup>405</sup>

The power balance, then, may not be so obvious or clear. In Hopewell’s experience, interviews can be extremely productive and satisfying for both interviewee and interviewer, including when the latter is the pastor. ‘So accustomed are members to being told what they *should* believe that to be asked what they in fact *do* believe may prompt unprecedented communication.’<sup>406</sup>

### ***Should the Interviewer undertake Different roles?***

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<sup>402</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 99.

<sup>403</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 101.

<sup>404</sup> Peter J. Collins, ‘Negotiating Lives: Reflections on ‘Unstructured’ Interviewing’, *Sociological Research Online* 3, no. 3 (1998) <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/3/3/2.html> (12 July 2011).

<sup>405</sup> Paul Oliver, *The Student’s Guide to Research Ethics* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003), 56.

<sup>406</sup> Hopewell, *Congregation*, 91.

Young and Cullen came to know their subjects personally and intimately and this seems to have helped them understand and empathise. However, they provide a telling comment in relation to a group of carers who (following the death of those they cared for) ‘were more ready, even keener, than others to unburden themselves to us.’<sup>407</sup> This raises an interesting ethical consideration. To what extent should I be the minister of my interviewees during the interviews, and to what extent are my interviewees happy to take part because they think it may help them deal with bereavement issues? Collins seeks to show that ‘interviews are social interactions in which meaning is necessarily negotiated between a number of selves (and in which power may be more or less shared). The interviewer need be neither “objective” nor “detached”, but should rather be “engaged”.’ The interviewee may create a narrative thread not directly relevant to the subject under discussion which can provide them ‘with a ready means of countering and undermining the unequal relations of power which are said to typify all interviews.’<sup>408</sup> For Collins, interviews produce narratives rather than facts, and these narratives are stories of lives lived. So a real dialogue should develop where stories are shared. It may be particularly important for people suffering ‘disrupted lives’ to create meaning through story-telling.<sup>409</sup> This is an important insight for me given the topic of my research. Collins concludes from his experience of interviews that it is pointless and unhelpful not to play the various roles which may be asked of the interviewer – co-performer, confessor, counsellor, sympathetic ear, etc. The interviewee will relate to us in complex ways, no matter how structured or unstructured the interviewer tries to make it. Hopewell suggests there are benefits to be had from my particular situation.

Though [church] members can never achieve the detachment of an ethnographer who comes from the outside, they can become their own best informants, because they already participate in the structures that an outsider has to learn. The trick is that members must learn to function and observe *as if* they were outsiders so that they see afresh the myriad matters about the congregation that they now take for granted.<sup>410</sup>

There are positive benefits to having a close prior relationship with research subjects. Already, trust is established, the context and culture known, a part of the

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<sup>407</sup> Young and Cullen, *A Good Death*, 146.

<sup>408</sup> Collins, ‘Negotiating Lives’, 3.

<sup>409</sup> Collins, ‘Negotiating Lives’, 9.

<sup>410</sup> Hopewell, *Congregation*, 89.

‘journey’ of life shared, and personal communication and understanding established. De Laine points out how it can also help any power imbalance, but at a potential cost: ‘The formation of friendships with subjects functions to balance the power differential between the researcher and subjects, but the more equal relations create a potential for ethical or moral dilemma.’<sup>411</sup> This is to do with emotional involvement and boundary violations of roles (minister and interviewer, friend and researcher, etc.). Multiple overlapping roles can give mixed messages to the interviewee. Marlene De Laine also warns that potential harm can arise to both interviewee *and* interviewer.

There may be a need to remind subjects which role is currently the master and controlling one and which is to have a subsidiary and supportive function. Self-disclosures are ways of establishing equal relations between researchers and researched. The ethnographers may share personal information with subjects and open windows to their shared interests and expectations, but caution is needed to ensure the participants are not too ‘open’ and the researcher is not subsequently cast in the role of ‘exploiter’ or ‘betrayal’ of trust.<sup>412</sup>

Finally, De Laine points to the importance of how the researcher leaves the field, and suggests that continuing relations are some help in guarding against exploitation during the interview process. Russell Bernard points to the responsibility of the interviewer to ensure that by discussing certain issues the interviewee does not later suffer emotional distress for having done so.<sup>413</sup>

In my own research, therefore, potential problems were identified in advance. Some participants might find it difficult to talk about LAD without re-experiencing the emotional trauma of bereavement. In such situations the pastoral needs of my interviewee will take precedence. It was therefore explained that they can stop the interview at any point, as can I. While recognising that the role of interviewer and counsellor cannot be simultaneous or simply ‘mixed’ within the interview, nevertheless I was well placed to fulfil both roles and did so as necessary to prevent harm to my subjects (and myself).<sup>414</sup> There is also a clear reminder here that my responsibilities continue beyond the research process. Again, I believe this is actually a benefit of my situation rather than a problem,

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<sup>411</sup> Marlene De Laine, *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2000), 134.

<sup>412</sup> De Laine, *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice*, 136.

<sup>413</sup> H. Russell Bernard, ‘Unstructured and Semistructured Interviewing’, in his *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (London: Sage, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1994), 215.

<sup>414</sup> See Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice*, 147-50 for the potential pitfalls and benefits of this dual role.

because I will continue to be the friend and minister of these people and therefore can ‘close’ the process in an ethically sensitive and correct way (for example, by not saying things in future sermons or study groups which could in any way betray confidences or imply criticism of privately expressed views).

### ***Should Interviewing be Active or Passive?***

Charlotte Davies reminds us that it is important to be clear about the way in which reality is being represented and accessed in interviews. The traditional assumption is ‘that those being interviewed have access to knowledge which they can share with the researcher when they are asked to do so in ways that help them remember and organise the presentation of their knowledge. In this view, what the respondent says is a representation of social and cultural realities.’<sup>415</sup> So the interviewer is mining existing knowledge, and in doing so should remain neutral so as not to influence the responses. The main issues would be whether the interviewee has complete and/or correct knowledge, and whether they are deceiving the interviewer in any way. But Davies points out that this approach may work against open and free-flowing discussion (as the interviewer is not participating), and also raises a major theoretical problem – ‘individuals are not able simply to provide uncontested knowledge about their social world. Much more commonly, interviews contain apparent contradictions, gropings, suggestions.’<sup>416</sup> Hence many now argue that interviewing ‘is better understood as a process in which interviewer and interviewee are both involved in developing understanding, that is in constructing their knowledge of the social world.’<sup>417</sup> (This might suggest that the only knowledge available is about the interview itself, rather than any objective knowledge about the world as such, which of course is resolved by Davies’ critical realist approach.)

To what extent can and should the interviewer express opinions and enter into dialogue? The traditional view is ‘not at all’, or only as a strategy to get the interviewee to open up. However, this has been challenged. Davies points to the influential feminist argument of Oakley that ‘both for ethical reasons and for the efficacy of the interview, an interviewer must be prepared to share their own knowledge’. Oakley suggests that the interviewing process can only develop

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<sup>415</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 96.

<sup>416</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 96.

<sup>417</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 97-98.

effectively ‘when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship’.<sup>418</sup> I am not convinced by this argument in the context of my own research. While recognising the joint meaning-making endeavour of a semi-structured interview, nevertheless I wanted to avoid some of my interviewees hoping that I could and should simply give them ‘the answer’. The Oakley position goes too far; I adopted an ‘engaged’ but basically neutral and passive position in order to ensure that it was the views of the interviewees which emerged and not my own, or what they thought were my views.

### ***The Interview***

For Russell Bernard, ‘The key to successful interviewing is learning how to probe effectively – that is, to stimulate an informant to produce more information, without injecting yourself so much into the interaction that you only get a reflection of yourself in the data.’ The most difficult probing technique is the silent probe, ‘which consists of just remaining quiet and waiting for an informant to continue.’<sup>419</sup> According to Hopewell, ‘The interviewer attempts, of course, to keep the discussion focused on the ideas of the informant and avoids personal responses that disclose the inquirer’s own views.’<sup>420</sup> He suggests that ‘the interviewer treats the member’s answer as a disclosure of meaning important within itself, a symbolic construction that the interviewer must try to understand.’<sup>421</sup>

Interviewees had advance notice of the four broad areas of discussion rather than the detailed questions themselves (or my probes and reminders). I sought to avoid loaded and leading questions, and tried to ask open-ended questions. I began with a ‘grand tour’ question,<sup>422</sup> encouraging a verbal tour of their general experience of the deaths of people known to them. The physical context was also important: the choice was given as to whether they would prefer to meet in their own home rather than mine. I asked permission to record the interviews electronically and, as Oliver suggests, made it clear that participants were able to

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<sup>418</sup> Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 102.

<sup>419</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 215.

<sup>420</sup> Hopewell, *Congregation*, 91.

<sup>421</sup> Hopewell, *Congregation*, 91.

<sup>422</sup> Beth L. Leech, ‘Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews’, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35, no. 4 (2002), 665-68.



withdraw at any point.<sup>423</sup> Because the interviewer is ‘implicitly or explicitly, a co-creator of the narrative that is the product of the research encounter’,<sup>424</sup> sensitivity to body language, gestures, pauses etc. was also needed. The researcher also needs to be very aware of the present moment – ‘to be fully aware that the creation of meanings around the issues being discussed may be contradictory, emotionally charged and quite at odds with what the researcher initially thought was going on.’<sup>425</sup>

## ETHICS

The three central ethical principles involved when undertaking a research project such as this are the need: to avoid harm to participants; to obtain the specific consent of the participants (which means providing adequate information concerning all aspects of the project); and to protect the confidentiality of the participants (which means adhering to Data Protection legislation). The code of ethics of the American Association of Anthropology makes it clear that ethical obligations must take precedence over any other interests of the researcher. The key emphasis is that ‘researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work.’<sup>426</sup>

However, interviews can also be beneficial. According to Oliver, ‘It is arguably an ethical issue for the researcher to try to ensure that interviewees maximise the opportunity inherent in this situation, and gain something personally from this opportunity for reflection.’ So, ‘the research interview is not merely a one-sided process, designed to help the researcher complete a research exercise, but rather a process of mutual help where the interviewee achieves a certain level of fulfilment through the exercise of reason and reflection.’<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Oliver, *Student’s Guide to Research Ethics*, 47.

<sup>424</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 61.

<sup>425</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 62.

<sup>426</sup> <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>

<sup>427</sup> Oliver, *Student’s Guide to Research Ethics*, 56.

## APPENDIX F – PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

### A TYPICAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

***INTRODUCTION:** Rehearse the purpose of the research project, and stress again the importance of **their** views and opinions. No right answers, just their answers. Explain how the interview is going to be recorded, and that they may stop the interview at any time.*

*[NOTE – these are additions/clarifications resulting from early interview experience]*

#### **1. Your experience of death, and your views of an afterlife:**

- 1.1. Begin with a ‘grand tour’ question: ‘I wonder if you remember the death of Princess Diana. Can you tell me what you remember most clearly about the events surrounding her death and funeral?’ *[Not really relevant or useful in most interviews – no problem in starting with 1.2]*
- 1.2. ‘Most of us don’t know people like Diana. Can you tell me now please about some people who have died who have been known to you personally.’ *[Idea is simply to get them to list at least a few close/known people who have died – but not to go into reactions/emotions around the death etc.]*
- 1.3. ‘Are these people whom you have known and who have died in any way still alive?’ *[Belief in life after death. Soul at sleep awaiting resurrection?]*
- 1.4. ‘If not, what do you think happens to people when they die?’

#### **2. The nature of the afterlife:**

- 2.1. ‘I want to talk now about the way in which these people are still alive. Could you tell me first where you think they are?’ *[Heaven, hell, purgatory, other]*
- 2.2. ‘Do they go to this place immediately after death?’
- 2.3. ‘Are they alive in a physical way, perhaps with a new kind of body, or with their body re-made? If so, what age do you think they are?’
- 2.4. ‘Or are they alive in a more spiritual way? If so, what do you understand by this?’
- 2.5. ‘Do you think we have a part of us, some people call it a soul, which survives physical death? If so, can you tell me what you think the soul is?’
- 2.6. ‘Do you favour burial or cremation? Can you say why?’ *[Any link to soul belief?]*

- 2.7. 'Are they with other people in the afterlife?'
- 2.8. 'Are they with people whom they knew in their earthly lives? If so, who do you think you will meet in the afterlife?' [*People whom you did not like?*]
- 2.9. 'If so, how do you think we meet such people in the afterlife? Do we meet all the people we knew in our earthly lives?'
- 2.10. 'Will the people you meet be in the same relationship to you in the afterlife – friend, cousin, uncle, mum, husband, etc?'
- 2.11. 'Will you meet God and/or Jesus in the afterlife?'
- 2.12. 'Do people living in the afterlife remember their earthly life? If so, do they remember all of their earthly experience, or just as we remember it at the point of death?' [*Suffering, things left undone/incomplete – and also whether memory is complete, or just partial as we experience it now.*]
- 2.13. 'Are people in the afterlife aware of those still living their earthly lives?' [*Continuing lives of relatives/friends etc. Blessing or curse?*]
- 2.14. 'How are they aware of those still living? Do they have any awareness of what is happening to people in their earthly lives?' [*Do they actually see people here, etc., or are they just aware that others are not with them in the afterlife?*]
- 2.15. 'Have you had any direct experience of the continuing life of someone who has died?' [*Sightings/feelings/sounds. Ghosts.*]
- 2.16. 'Have you observed any remarkable experience with people near to the point of death?' [Or have you yourself had any such experience?] [*NDEs etc.*]
- 2.17. 'Have you ever attended a Spiritualist Church or been to see a medium?' [*Do you know anyone who has? What do you think of them?*]
- 2.18. 'Does the afterlife last forever? Do we change at all in the afterlife?'
- 2.19. 'What do we do in the afterlife? Music, worship, literature, golf, or other kinds of things which people may have enjoyed in their earthly lives?' [*Grow, learn, develop, boredom?*]

### **3. The afterlife and suffering:**

- 3.1. 'Does your belief in life after death help you cope with or better understand the death of someone close to you? If so, can you tell me how it helps?'

- 3.2. 'Do you think that belief in life after death could help other people to cope with or better understand the death of someone close to them? If so, can you tell me why?'
- 3.3. 'Does your belief in life after death make a difference when thinking about your own mortality?' *[i.e. when thinking about your own inevitable death]*?
- 3.4. 'Can you give me an example of what you have said in the past, or might say in the future, to a friend or relative who has just lost a loved one?'
- 3.5. 'Does your belief in life after death help you cope better with or understand bad things (e.g. suffering) which have happened to you? Can you explain to me how?'
- 3.6. 'Do you think that belief in life after death could help other people to cope with or better understand bad things (suffering) which have happened to them? If so, why?'
- 3.7. 'Can you give me an example of what you have said in the past, or might say in the future, to a friend or relative who experiences bad things (suffering)?'
- 3.8. 'Will people who endured bad things in their earthly lives have their suffering somehow 'put right' in the afterlife? Does this need to happen? If so, why?'  
*[Theodicy. Probe how they think this works? Evil?][Clarify distinction between those IN the afterlife who have suffered, and those in this life who are suffering, and those in this life who are caring for those suffering. Also issue of fairness is raised here. ]*
- 3.9. 'Can you tell me how this might work, for example, for a person who died very young of a painful and debilitating disease?' *[Fairness, justice etc.]*
- 3.10. 'Why do we all have to die?'
- 3.11. 'Is there any suffering or wrongdoing in the afterlife?'

#### **4. Church doctrine, the Bible, and your views of the afterlife:**

- 4.1. 'Does everyone experience life after death? Is it the same destination/experience for everyone?' *[Judgement. Punishment. Election. Non-believers. Explore purgatory idea, – a second chance, or delayed judgement. Links to 2.2 potentially]*
- 4.2. 'What do you think is the function or purpose of the afterlife?'
- 4.3. 'Do you think there is any element of judgement or punishment in the afterlife? If so, how does this work?'

- 4.4. 'What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for us?' [*Empty tomb?*]
- 4.5. 'What do you think are the main things the Bible says about an afterlife?' [*Paul – Romans and Corinthians? Jesus?*]
- 4.6. 'What do you think is the 'official' view of the church about an afterlife?' [*Resurrection? Purgatory? 'Life after life after death'?* ]
- 4.7. 'If your views differ from what you think is the view of the Church and/or Bible, does it matter?' [*Comparison with other doctrines? – life after death clearer, or less clear?*]

**5. *Other things which have helped form your views of the afterlife:***

- 5.1. 'What other sources/information has helped form your views about an afterlife?'
- 5.2. 'Have your beliefs about the afterlife changed over time?' [*Why, how? Influence of crises?*]
- 5.3. 'What ideas/beliefs/prayers/sayings/images have helped and/or comforted you after the death of someone? What has not helped?' [*Theodicy again? God taking people into heaven? Use of 'heavenly' language and images?*]
- 5.4. And, finally, is there anything else you want to say regarding any of the topics we have discussed?

# RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

*[Approved by University of Durham Theology and Religion Departmental Ethics Committee, May 2009]*

**Research Project Title:** ‘Lay Christian views of life after death: the reflections of some Congregational Christians’

*You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This information sheet is designed to provide you with all the information you might need. Please take time to read it carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.*

## **What is the purpose of this project?**

The project is seeking to gain the views of ordinary Christian people concerning life after death, and to compare this with various academic/doctrinal views. If there are significant differences between the two, then why should this be so? What does it say about how doctrine and academic theology is undertaken and communicated to the church in general?

## **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You are part of the Coast Congregational Church, and your minister is conducting this research with Christian people of his own congregation. It is hoped that most people in the church will take part.

## **Do I have to take part?**

No. The research is entirely voluntary and you may decline to take part without any repercussions or consequences whatsoever. If you decide to take part and then change your mind, you should also know that you are free to withdraw from the project at any time and again with no repercussions or consequences.

## **What will I have to do if I decide to take part?**

Everyone who takes part in the project will spend about an hour and a half talking with Michael Armstrong about the issue of life after death. The technical term for this is a semi-structured interview, which is really like an in-depth conversation on specific topics, in this case concerning life after death. But this is not an exam! The object of the interview is not to see if you have the ‘right’ answer, but rather to explore with you in depth whatever views you hold on this issue. Your views are very important. There are no right or wrong answers, just your answers.

These meetings will be held in your own home, or other place of your choosing where you feel entirely comfortable. They will be recorded so that an accurate record is produced. An electronic recorder will be used, and notes will then be transcribed from this.

In some circumstances it may be desirable to have a follow-up interview/conversation, but for the majority of participants it should involve only one meeting. The meetings will take place during the summer of 2009, but the overall project will not conclude until June 2011 (publication date for D.Min thesis at Durham University).

### **What will you be asked to talk about during the interview?**

You will be invited to discuss five broad areas relating to life after death:

- a) Your experience of death, and your views of an afterlife
- b) The nature of the afterlife
- c) The afterlife and suffering
- d) Church doctrine, the Bible, and your views of the afterlife
- e) Other things which have helped form your views of the afterlife

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Life after death is a very emotional subject, and you may be faced with memories and feelings which you find uncomfortable. During the meetings you may stop the process at any time.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

You may also find it very interesting and helpful to think deeply about this matter. It is not often that we have the opportunity and motivation to think through an important part of our Christian belief. It is also hoped that the results of this project will be of assistance to others in better understanding how the subject of life after death can, and should, be dealt with in the church.

### **What if something goes wrong?**

This research study is being conducted under the auspices of the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University. Should you wish to complain about your experience of this project you can contact the Chair of the University of Durham Theology and Religion Departmental Ethics Committee, Abbey House, Palace Green, Durham DH1 3RS (tel. 0191 3343940).

### **Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All information which is collected about you and from you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you which is eventually published or otherwise disseminated will be anonymised, either by having your name removed or changed to a fictitious name. The only other people who will on occasion have access to the data (recordings, transcripts etc.) will be relevant supervising academic staff of the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University and external examiners for the D.Min programme. Following publication of the D.Min thesis, which is placed in the library of Durham University, all tapes and transcripts will be destroyed. Should you withdraw from the project at any time, you may request that any data concerning you be destroyed.

The requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998 will be met in full. This document comprises a 'fair processing statement' as required by the Act. Any data collected will be used only for the research purposes indicated above, and will be stored securely until being destroyed at the end of the project.

### **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The results of the project will be published in the form of a D.Min thesis in Durham University library.

### **Who is organising and supervising the research?**

This research project is being conducted by a Doctoral student in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University. Professor Douglas Davies is the supervising academic. The project has been approved by the research ethics committee of the Department of Theology and Religion.

### **Contact for further information**

Revd Michael Armstrong, 21 Kenilworth Road, Whitley Bay NE25 8BE (tel. 0191 2913267)



## RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** ‘Lay Christian views of life after death: the reflections of some Congregational Christians’

[A research investigation conducted by Revd Michael Armstrong as part of the Doctor of Ministry programme of the University of Durham]

*(The participant should read thoroughly this sheet and sign below if satisfied with and happy to confirm all the points stated below)*

- I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, and have received a copy for future reference.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the study and have received satisfactory answers to any queries.
- I have received enough information about the study.
- I consent to participate in the study and for information provided by me during the study to be used as indicated in the Participant Information Sheet.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and without having to give a reason for withdrawing.

Signed ..... Date .....

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)

.....

- Many thanks for taking part in the project. Please keep your signed copy of this consent form and the Research Participant Information Sheet. Please return the other signed copy of the consent form to Michael Armstrong. -

## SUPPLEMENTARY RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: DEALING WITH DATA

**Research Project Title:** ‘Lay Christian views of life after death: the reflections of some Congregational Christians’ [A research investigation conducted by Revd Michael Armstrong as part of the Doctor of Ministry programme of the University of Durham]

*In 2009, prior to your taking part in the project, you received the original Research Participant Information Sheet which clarified many issues, including how data from the project would be handled. It was stated that:*

All information which is collected about you and from you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you which is eventually published or otherwise disseminated will be anonymised, either by having your name removed or changed to a fictitious name. The only other people who will on occasion have access to the data (recordings, transcripts etc.) will be relevant supervising academic staff of the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University and external examiners for the D.Min programme. Following publication of the D.Min thesis, which is placed in the library of Durham University, all tapes and transcripts will be destroyed. Should you withdraw from the project at any time, you may request that any data concerning you be destroyed.

The requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998 will be met in full. This document comprises a ‘fair processing statement’ as required by the Act. Any data collected will be used only for the research purposes indicated above, and will be stored securely until being destroyed at the end of the project.

*I am contacting you now because I wish to seek your permission to retain the data (recordings and transcripts) produced during this project for potential use in future academic research. It is my view and the view of my supervisors that information which you have provided during this project could be valuable for future research. All such data would be stored securely, in strict confidence, and would be anonymised if used in the future (as per the above paragraphs).*

*If you agree to this request then please complete the attached Supplementary Research Participant Consent Form and return it to me.*

*However, you should not feel obliged in any way to agree to this request. If you feel uncomfortable with the retention of this data then please ignore this request. If I have not received a consent form from you by the end of October then I will assume you wish for all data relating to you to be destroyed following the completion of this project (as per the original participant agreement).*

*Many thanks,*

*Michael. [September 2010]*

## SUPPLEMENTARY RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** ‘Lay Christian views of life after death: the reflections of some Congregational Christians’

[A research investigation conducted by Revd Michael Armstrong as part of the Doctor of Ministry programme of the University of Durham]

*I have read and understood the Supplementary Participant Information Sheet (September 2010), and have received a copy for future reference.*

*I consent to information provided by me during the study to be retained by Revd Michael Armstrong for use in future academic research as indicated in the Supplementary Participant Information Sheet.*

*Signed* ..... *Date* .....

*(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)*

.....

## APPENDIX G – EXCURSUS IN DEFENCE OF THE SUBSTANTIAL SOUL

### THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY

I suggest that the bogeyman of Greek influence in this area has been over exaggerated. James Barr<sup>428</sup> argues that recent scholarship has been wrong in so easily discarding thoughts of an immortal soul as a foreign Greek influence on the New Testament.<sup>429</sup> He questions the way Hebrew ‘totality thinking’ has been portrayed as the correct, biblical, anti-Greek alternative, arguing that there is no unitary ‘*nephesh* concept’ (the word can mean ‘life’ in some contexts and ‘soul’ in others), and that Hebrew totality thinking is just too (suspiciously) good to be true.

Is it even remotely plausible that ancient Hebrews, at the very earliest stage of their tradition, already had a picture of humanity which agreed so well with the modern esteem for psychosomatic unity? How did they manage to get it all so perfectly right, when the Greeks, apparently, so thoroughly misunderstood everything?<sup>430</sup>

Barr also makes the telling point that if the Hebrew concept was already so complete and perfect, then why did Greek thought have any influence at all? He argues that Hebrew thought used the bits it needed from Greek thought. Greek ideas were not accepted in total: for example, the Socratic-Platonic idea of eternal (i.e. pre-existing) souls, and the idea of transmigration of the soul, were not accepted. Furthermore, the acceptance of some concepts was not a consequence of the approval of an elite, but rather emerged from the faith community; it was what actually worked in practice. Why else, Barr asks, does the ‘soul’ idea persist so strongly today?

A similar point emerges when considering the Maccabean origin of the idea of resurrection. Barr suggests that Maccabean martyrdom was new in that it was to *enforce conformity* (rather than attacking alien foreigners or enemies), so

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<sup>428</sup>James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality: The Read-Tuckwell lectures for 1990* (London: SCM, 1992).

<sup>429</sup>The vanguard representatives of this view are Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), and Krister Stendahl, ‘Immortality is Too Much and Too Little’, in K. Stendahl, *Meanings: the Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 193-202. A more recent example is Richard Bauckham, and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 126-30.

<sup>430</sup> Barr, *Garden of Eden*, 36-7.

gruesome torture and death could be avoided simply by saying certain words or undertaking simple acts. Totality of the person was of little use when faced with the literal destruction of the physical body. Those suffering sought to hold the religious loyalties of *the soul* even as the body was being destroyed. Immortality of the soul actually made it more essential for the persecuted to remain steadfast, because they would not die and ‘they’ would be judged after death. ‘In this situation, then, immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body worked together.’ And this sort of symbiosis of the two concepts also operated in traditional Christianity.<sup>431</sup> In other words, while the final justice of God was to be visibly proven by resurrection of the persecuted martyr (as per Stendahl), it is surely also the case that the personal integrity and survival of a martyr is not a ‘little’ matter for either the person concerned or his maker. Stendahl comments that his essay ‘caused some stir, and I received more angry mail about it than any other speech or article.’<sup>432</sup> This is not surprising, because he is effectively devaluing the worth of human life and contradicting the centuries of Christian tradition and history where immortality of the soul was held as a central tenet. Stendahl says that immortality of the soul was flawed because it was too personal and too small a concept, immortality for the *individual*. By contrast, he argues, resurrection answers the ‘big’ question of theodicy, the question of a moral universe. But surely resurrection is also of importance and interest to ‘little me’?

Barr reminds us that traditional Christianity ‘had invested far more heavily in the idealist, immaterialist, side of Greek philosophy than people now wanted to admit.’<sup>433</sup> He points to the Westminster Confession as a clear example of this (see Appendix B).<sup>434</sup> David Brown points to the influence here of the Greek idea that like can only be known by like, so if we are able to know the immaterial divine there must be something of the same in us. He suggests it is no small thing that the immortal soul became established both in Roman and Presbyterian (Westminster) confessions.<sup>435</sup>

There is also, I suggest, a mistaken focus in the contemporary debate on the ‘immortality’ of the soul. The distinction between what God must do and will do is not as great as it at first seems, and in their haste to deny that we have an

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<sup>431</sup> Barr, *Garden of Eden*, 54.

<sup>432</sup> Stendahl, ‘Immortality is Too Much and Too Little’, 193.

<sup>433</sup> Barr, *Garden of Eden*, 99.

<sup>434</sup> Barr, *Garden of Eden*, 103.

<sup>435</sup> Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 123-6.

absolute (human) right to anything from God, many theologians seem to overstate this difference. Oscar Cullman famously set the Greek intrusion of immortality of the soul against the biblical/Hebraic view of bodily resurrection,<sup>436</sup> but in so doing, claims Carole Zaleski, not only has he distorted how we can read the Church fathers, the monastic tradition, the Anglican divines, and indeed most of the spiritual classics of the Christian heritage; but also the living have been cut off from the dead. Zaleski points out that the immense public interest in NDEs<sup>437</sup> shows that such communion is a basic desire of most people, including Christians. She is surely correct in suggesting that such a discrepancy shows ‘the possibility that something has been missing from contemporary theology; that a fundamental and legitimate need has been going unmet.’<sup>438</sup>

Barr reminds us that only in the last century has our tradition doubted an immortal soul. For nearly two thousand years before that ‘it was held as clear that immortality of the human soul was central to religion. ... Anyone who doubted ... was likely to be considered as a dangerous heretic, if not a total denier of religion.’<sup>439</sup> But immortality has now come to be seen as *opposed* to resurrection (Cullmann), and as a Greek infiltration. Yet Barr states that immortality of the soul is ‘something that was built into the entire tradition of classical Protestantism.’ He believes that the supposed contradiction or problematic between resurrection and immortality of the soul does not exist in Christian tradition or Scripture. Ideas about immortality of the soul increased dramatically in the tradition once people began to realise that the world was not going to end, and therefore the question of where dead people were now became more important.<sup>440</sup> The soul answered the question of how someone resurrected with a new body was the same person as before death. Simon Tugwell points out that it was not until 1513, at the fifth Lateran Council, that the immortality of the soul was formally declared to be a Catholic doctrine; but the previous dispute was philosophical (the correct interpretation of Aristotle) rather than doctrinal. Denial of immortality of the soul was seen as being at odds with the crucial doctrines of resurrection and judgement, so philosophers were called upon to defend this view.

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<sup>436</sup> Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*

<sup>437</sup> Raymond A. Moody, *Life After Life: the Investigation of a Phenomenon – Survival of Bodily Death* (Covington, GA: Mockingbird Books, 1975).

<sup>438</sup> Carol Zaleski, ‘In Defence of Immortality’, *First Things* 105 (2000), 36-42.

<sup>439</sup> Barr, *Garden of Eden*, 1.

<sup>440</sup> Barr, *Garden of Eden*, 105.

This reflects the widespread belief by then that the immortality of the soul was crucial.<sup>441</sup>

Maurice Wiles asks whether the perceived difference between resurrection of the body and immortal soul is actually significant. A key argument for the superiority of resurrection is that it stresses God's action in re-creating us, rather than eternal life being viewed as a property or a right of human beings. But, as Wiles points out, surely God is equally the source of life if we possess something immortal, it just shifts the point of God's giving. 'If man has an immortal soul, he has it only because God has so created him. It is not a matter of his own achievement.' Also, according to the Apologists, the soul was *potentially* immortal, 'it lives by partaking in the life of God only because and so long as God wills.'<sup>442</sup> Murray Harris is clear that resurrection and immortality are inseparable and complementary ideas, 'since it is only by means of a resurrection transformation that the believer gains immortality, and the receipt of immortality is the invariable result of experiencing a resurrection transformation.'<sup>443</sup>

## THE INFLUENCE OF SCIENCE

The influence of recent advances in neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and other related areas has also, I suggest, been overstated. Many seem to have too easily accepted that science has dealt a fatal blow to any dualist conception of human being as body plus soul, and have produced various forms of monist view in response. Such views are attempts to accept the force of the scientific argument against a soul, but to reject a reductive physicalist approach that would claim that higher human capacities such as rationality, morality, and religious experience can be explained *only* by brain function.

### *Variations of Monism*

Nancey Murphy sees three key challenges from science: (1) How does the mind-body interaction work? (2) Darwinism shows how close we are to other animals, so how do we have souls? (3) Neuroscience shows that many things previously attributed to a soul are in fact functions of the brain. However, this

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<sup>441</sup> Simon Tugwell, *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), 82-3.

<sup>442</sup> Wiles, *Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, 129.

<sup>443</sup> Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 239-40.

does not mean we have to accept reductive physicalism.<sup>444</sup> Murphy has produced a theory of *non-reductive physicalism*, which argues that ‘if there is no soul then these higher human capacities might be explained in a different manner. *In part* they are explainable as brain functions, but their *full* explanation requires attention to human social relations, to cultural factors, and, most importantly, to our relationship with God.’<sup>445</sup> Human distinctiveness, for Murphy, is not to be found in a soul, ‘but rather in special capabilities, enabled by our more complex neural systems, language and culture.’ Theology says what is distinct about us is what is important to God: morality, and a capacity for relationship with God and others. So, ‘in addition to all that science can tell us about ourselves, we need a religious point of view in order to know the significance of the scientific findings.’<sup>446</sup> Murphy claims that the issue of how God influences us if we don’t have a soul is actually solved by science with top-down causality. She also points out that science can never prove reductive physicalism, because ‘it will always be possible for the dualist to claim that ... mental events are merely *correlated* with events in particular regions of the brain.’<sup>447</sup> However, she does accept that ‘science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness.’<sup>448</sup>

Warren Brown also favours non-reductive physicalism, but accepts that recent research in neurological science means ‘there seems to be a rapidly diminishing pool of human capacities and experiences that have not yet been found to be influenced by neural activity and that might be reserved for the activity of an ontologically distinct and immaterial soul.’<sup>449</sup> Brown also appeals to top-down causality: ‘conscious decisions and will are real phenomena that are effective in exerting a top-down (or whole-part) causal influence on the

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<sup>444</sup> For an example of reductive physicalism, see Jesse M. Bering, ‘The Folk Psychology of Souls’ *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 29 (2006), 453-98. Immortality is a necessary illusion, she argues, a psychological response to the unique selective pressures of the human social environment.

<sup>445</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls*, 70.

<sup>446</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls*, 116-8.

<sup>447</sup> Nancey Murphy, ‘Human Nature: Historical, Scientific and Religious Issues’, in Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, (eds.), *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 13. See Richard Swinburne’s defence of traditional dualism below, page 214.

<sup>448</sup> Murphy ‘Human Nature’, 18-9.

<sup>449</sup> Warren S. Brown ‘Neurobiological Embodiment of Spirituality and Soul’ in Malcolm Jeeves (ed.), *From Cells to Souls – and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 59.



neurophysiological processes of the brain.’ However, the new element which Brown adds is *emergence*. ‘Our thinking, deciding, and experiencing involve new causal properties that *emerge from the topology of the complex interactive operations of the entire brain*. These higher-level emergent properties cannot be entirely accounted for by describing the operation of various contributing neural subsystems.’ He realises that his *emergent monism* faces the big philosophical issue of how the immaterial can emerge from the material, but argues that what is emergent is *not* entities or new physical forces, but rather ‘*levels of causal efficacy*’. So ‘soul’ is an aspect of physical existence, not an additional immaterial essence.<sup>450</sup> Brown also argues that those things which used to be attributed to the substantial soul are ‘human souliness’, which is about *personal relatedness* (intra-personal, between individuals, and between an individual and God). We become persons and souls ‘as we experience ourselves within a relational network of God and other human beings. Our souliness is, thus, established and enriched by our deepest and most significant relationships.’<sup>451</sup> For Brown, ‘Humans become persons with particular value in the cosmos not by the presence of a unique additional substance (an immaterial soul), but by a unique relationship to God.’<sup>452</sup> His *emergence* idea is that as cognitive capacities develop (such as language, episodic memory, self-awareness, awareness of the future) so the ability for relatedness develops; and as this flourishes so we acquire ‘souliness’.

John Polkinghorne uses his scientific understanding to re-conceive the soul as an immensely complex ‘information-bearing pattern’ rather than a physical component or substance. The soul ‘is modified as we acquire new experiences, insights and memories, in accordance with the dynamic of our living history.’ On this understanding the soul is not intrinsically immortal: the information-bearing pattern will dissolve after death by the decay (or cremation) of our bodies. However, Polkinghorne claims that ‘it is a perfectly coherent hope that the pattern that is a human being could be held in the divine memory after a person’s death.’ He admits that ‘such a disembodied existence, even if located within the divine remembrance, would be less than fully human.’ The ‘souls’ would be restored to full life by bodily resurrection.<sup>453</sup> This has echoes of the ‘objective immortality’

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<sup>450</sup> Brown, ‘Neurobiological Embodiment’, 63-6.

<sup>451</sup> Brown, ‘Neurobiological Embodiment’, 68.

<sup>452</sup> Brown, ‘Neurobiological Embodiment’, 71.

<sup>453</sup> Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 106-8.

of process theology,<sup>454</sup> of which Polkinghorne is so critical (although the key difference of re-embodiment remains). During the (presumably very long) time in which the souls are held in the mind of God, something remarkable apparently takes place. God will be at work

purifying and transforming the souls awaiting resurrection in ways that respect their integrity. Ultimately, what has been lost will be restored and what of good was never gained will be bestowed.<sup>455</sup>

This seems to raise more questions than it resolves. How is such intervention to happen? Will we be in any sense aware (conscious, without a body?) of these proceedings? How would the experience of being able to run be restored to a child crippled from birth, or the ability to think conceptually to the child brain-damaged at birth? Polkinghorne confuses the issue later on when he also introduces the idea of a re-vamped purgatory for the time immediately following re-embodiment in the transformed new creation, a necessary purification following self-judgement after being confronted with the reality of one's own life and God's life. 'This purgative process will be an indispensable preparation for the more profound engagements with the life of the holy God that lie beyond it.'<sup>456</sup> I suggest that we see here an example of the application of science not being of any great help.

### ***A New Kind of (Emergent) Dualism***

William Hasker also uses the concept of emergence, but to produce a new form of dualism. He argues that the findings of modern science mean that we must reject Cartesian dualism, that is, the idea of 'the soul as an entity of a completely different nature than the physical, an entity with no essential or internal relationship to the body, which must be added to the body *ad extra* by a special divine act of creation.' By contrast, Hasker argues that '*the human mind is produced by the human brain and is not a separate element "added to" the brain from outside.*' Mental properties are emergent. 'A conscious experience simply is a unity, and to decompose it into a collection of separate parts is to falsify it.'<sup>457</sup> Hasker rejects the materialism of Murphy. She is mistaken in her claim that downward causation is the answer to causal reductionism, because the 'upper

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<sup>454</sup> David Ray Griffin, *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 172-3, moves away from the usual form of 'objective immortality' in process thought. See also Granville C. Henry, 'Does Process Thought Allow Personal Immortality', *Religious Studies* 31, no. 3 (1995), 311-21.

<sup>455</sup> Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 111.

<sup>456</sup> Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 133.

<sup>457</sup> William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 189-90.

levels' are not things. '*A person's being aware of a complex fact does not consist of parts of the person being aware of parts of the fact.* Once we grasp this, materialism is seen to be in deep trouble.'<sup>458</sup> So Hasker proposes *emergent dualism*. 'The central idea is that when elements are organised into certain complex wholes, something genuinely new comes into being, something that is not reducible to or explainable in terms of the elements.'<sup>459</sup> His view is dualist 'in that it posits a continuing, unitary, *psychic individual* that is distinct from the biological organism. But it is an *emergent* dualism, because the mental individual *emerges from* the organism and is sustained by it; it is not (as in traditional dualism) a separate element *added to* the organism from outside by divine fiat.'<sup>460</sup> Like Swinburne, Hasker argues that because the conscious self is a *distinct individual* which is not identical with the physical organism, 'it is capable of existing, if sustained by divine power, in the absence of the organism.'<sup>461</sup>

Keith Ward also develops a form of emergence in support of traditional dualism, but does not use that term. He argues that, properly understood, biology has not caused any real problems for the Christian view of soul, which 'can easily be seen as developing continuously from lower, non-rational or non-cognitive, forms of life. In modern terminology, we might say that, when the brain reaches a certain stage of complexity, the power of conceptual thought, of reasoning and thinking, begins to exist; and that is when a rational soul begins to be.'<sup>462</sup>

One of the interviewees indicated a form of emergence. James believes that from the point of conception you produce a soul, and it is shaped and influenced by your life. The soul is *given* 'in so far as, yes, you have a soul.' But, really, 'you produce it by your actions.' For James, a newborn child has a soul, but it is a fairly blank thing which is then formed and patterned during life.

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<sup>458</sup> William Hasker, 'Emergent Dualism: Challenge to a Materialist Consensus' in Joel B. Green (ed.), *What about the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 110.

<sup>459</sup> Hasker, 'Emergent Dualism', 112.

<sup>460</sup> Hasker, 'Emergent Dualism', 113.

<sup>461</sup> Hasker, 'Emergent Dualism', 114.

<sup>462</sup> Ward, *In Defence of the Soul*, 55.

## *Traditional Dualism Defended*

Richard Swinburne makes the very important claim that scientific discoveries and progress in neurology are irrelevant to the main dualist contentions.

The dualist is not claiming merely to provide a theory which explains very well the physical phenomena. ... No, the dualist claims that dualism is involved in the phenomena, the experienced data, themselves – we have pains as well as brain states, and we continue to be conscious as well as our bodies continuing to function. That there are continuing subjects of experience who are conscious is a datum, itself in need of explanation.<sup>463</sup>

Science is also severely limited in what it can do because ‘brain events are such different things qualitatively from pains, smells, and tastes that a natural connection between them seems almost impossible.’<sup>464</sup> Swinburne argues that we must be honest in admitting that we do not understand everything: but, why should we be able to? We should not worry that dualists cannot explain what exactly the substance of the soul is and how it (and not the brain) supports subjective mental states; ‘there just are some things we cannot understand – while that fact gives no reason for supposing that they do not occur.’<sup>465</sup>

For Swinburne, conscious experience has two important elements: *continuity* (we remember the experiences of yesterday), and conscious experience as *causally efficacious* (they cause other thoughts and feelings and brain events, and make a difference to the agent’s behaviour). A succession of thoughts is not produced by brain processes alone; brain processes are necessary for this, but not sufficient. Swinburne argues that there really are mental events and states different from brain processes and observable public behaviour, and ‘that we can only make sense of the continuity of this conscious life by supposing that there are two parts to a man (and to many another animal) – a body and a soul (or mind).’<sup>466</sup> His often repeated point is that ‘Knowledge of what happens to bodies and their parts will not show you for certain what happens to persons.’<sup>467</sup> Swinburne adopts a ‘soft dualism’ by which he means that, unlike Plato and Descartes, he does not hold the extreme dualist view that the soul is naturally immortal. But he is still a substance dualist. A person comprises a body and a

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<sup>463</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, rev. ed., 1997), xi.

<sup>464</sup> Swinburne, *Evolution of the Soul*, 189-90.

<sup>465</sup> Swinburne, *Evolution of the Soul*, xiii.

<sup>466</sup> Swinburne, *Evolution of the Soul*, 2.

<sup>467</sup> Swinburne, *Evolution of the Soul*, 9.

soul. 'A man's body is that to which his physical properties belong. [For example, weight] ... A man's soul is that to which the (pure) mental properties of a man belong.'<sup>468</sup> Swinburne rejects Descartes who seems sometimes to say that the real person is the soul, with the body just attached to enable its operation. Rather, a man is both body and soul: *but*, the soul is the *essential part*, the part which can logically survive the body and maintain personal identity. Disembodied existence, for Swinburne, is a coherent idea. The soul can exist, but will not function, without a functioning brain; but there is no reason why God cannot facilitate its functioning without the physical brain, or indeed with a different brain.

'Souls are immaterial subjects of mental properties. They have sensations and thoughts, desires and beliefs, and perform intentional actions. Souls are the essential parts of human beings, and humans have sensations, etc., and perform intentional actions in virtue of their souls doing so.'<sup>469</sup> Swinburne denies that the soul is emergent, or is a process of natural evolution. Rather, the soul comes from God, a power behind nature who 'brings it about that there is linked to the brain of an animal or man a soul which interacts with it in a regular and predictable way.'<sup>470</sup> Swinburne adopts the orthodox Catholic view of Creationism (God creates anew each individual soul and gives it to each embryo able to receive it) but extends this to include animal souls also. Animals have some sort of mental life (although we do not fully know the nature of this), and therefore an inferior sort of soul; therefore Descartes was wrong in seeing animals as unconscious automata.

Other defences of the traditional dualist position focus on biblical evidence. John Cooper argues that the biblical teaching of a disembodied interim period between death and resurrection confirms a traditional dualist view. He terms this *holistic dualism*, to emphasise that the final destiny of a human being is to be re-embodied. Stephen T. Davis also argues that there is a post-mortem state of 'temporary disembodiment' which is not the sleep of the soul but a conscious state in the presence of God ('today you will be in Paradise with me', Lk. 23:43). However, being without a body is abnormal; re-embodiment at the general resurrection is the final afterlife state. But this final, 'spiritual' body does not

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<sup>468</sup> Swinburne, *Evolution of the Soul*, 145.

<sup>469</sup> Swinburne, *Evolution of the Soul*, 133.

<sup>470</sup> Swinburne, *Evolution of the Soul*, 198.

require physical continuity with the human earthly body to ensure personal identity; this is provided by the soul.<sup>471</sup>

Cooper accuses Hasker of producing a ‘substance dualism in disguise’ and argues that his theory is counter-intuitive and at least as problematic as more traditional dualist views.<sup>472</sup> Cooper argues that the Bible does not teach philosophical anthropology, but rather presents ‘a non-theoretical, “commonsense” vision of the afterlife which nevertheless has ontological presuppositions and implications.’ These include the requirement for ‘some sort of ontic duality or dualism.’<sup>473</sup> Cooper challenges the notion that brain states can simply be mapped onto specific states of mind, and points out that philosophers still take holistic dualism seriously, for example, Richard Swinburne, John Paul II, John Cobb, and Herman Dooyeweerd. For Cooper, holistic dualism is not just defensible, but is actually the correct position. ‘It is the best reading of Scripture, both in its ability to account for all the biblical data and in its conceptual adequacy with respect to the afterlife.’<sup>474</sup>

Carole Zaleski (who is not a substance dualist) makes some interesting, ‘ordinary’ points from human experience.

Multiplicity and disunity are as strong a feature of our existence as psychosomatic unity. We are legion, as the demons say. It is a marvel that all our different parts work together. ... Why should it surprise us if at death the soul separates from the body? Separating is the order of our lives as we tend toward death. If a man’s jowls can sink down while his brow stays up, why can’t his soul rise up when his body sinks down?

No matter what science can tell us, our ‘self’ can tell something more. The common witness of humanity is that some sort of soul-talk ‘is necessary to capture the full range of human experience’. Science cannot provide a necessary level of explanation. ‘There remains an irreducible quality to our experience which tells us that we are not perishing with it, that we are also made in the image and likeness of Another, whose [genetic] code is transcendent.’<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> Stephen T. Davis, ‘The Resurrection of the Dead’, in Davis (ed.), *Death and Afterlife*, 119-44

<sup>472</sup> John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), xxvii.

<sup>473</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 180.

<sup>474</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 231.

<sup>475</sup> Zaleski, ‘In Defence of Immortality’, 37.

## APPENDIX H - EXCURSUS ON APPROACHES TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

N. T. Wright believes that ordinary theologians should simply try to understand, or in any case just accept, the ‘correct’ biblical interpretation offered by experts in this academic practice. But is this the only or indeed the appropriate approach to biblical interpretation? Jaime Clark-Soles is clear that ‘There is no systematic theology in the NT regarding death and afterlife. ... In other words, the NT texts say a variety of things that cannot be construed as a single view.’<sup>476</sup> He contrasts his non-doctrinal, non-dogmatic agenda with the apologetic purpose of Wright’s work in this area. I suggest that the real question to ask of Wright is not so much whether his biblical (historical-critical) scholarship is correct, but rather how the conclusions of this scholarship should relate to Christians today. How can it, and why should it, inform the living faith of contemporary Christian people with regard to their belief in LAD?

### THE TEXT IN PAST AND PRESENT

For Johannes van der Ven, hermeneutics is based on an historical problem – revealing the meaning of texts produced in the past, which production was itself subject to many historical factors (speaker and writer, social/cultural context, linguistic). This creates the ‘time-bridging’ problem. ‘Hermeneutic work always implies the construction of a bridge between the past in which the text was created and the present. The result of this work is a new text representing a new reading of the old texts.’ We need a new reading because ‘when we look at the old text from the perspective of the present, we see it in a particular light that was not even conceivable at the time when the old text was produced.’ Of course, one can never be neutral in the reading of a text. ‘An aspect that forms part of the present out of which the old text is interpreted is the meaning of the text for one’s own existence in the present, ... The bridging of the time gap separating the old text from the present moment does not take place completely without personal interest

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<sup>476</sup> Jaime Clark-Soles, *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament* (New York; London: T&T Clark International, 2006), 1.

or involvement.’ The old text does not have a predetermined definitive meaning that can simply be applied to the current situation.<sup>477</sup>

Hans-Georg Gadamer provided the classic ‘horizons’ view of hermeneutics to illustrate this same point. The key thing is that our present horizon is in fact the only way to approach the horizon of a text, and only if we realise this can we gain real insight.<sup>478</sup> For Anthony Thiselton, ‘the goal of biblical hermeneutics is to bring about an active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and text, in such a way that the interpreter’s own horizon is re-shaped and enlarged.’<sup>479</sup> Gadamer allows no ‘final answer’ to any question. ‘Like a work of art, questions are inexhaustible. ... Certainly there would not be conformity with the original author. Life moves on, and for Gadamer hermeneutics is never replication. ... We can never put the clock back before *Truth and Method*. Everything is hermeneutical; everything requires interpretation.’<sup>480</sup>

Andrew Village shows how historical criticism has itself been criticised as being incapable of giving an objective and univocal meaning to a text; scholars have then gone ‘behind’ the text to the horizon of the author, while still not connecting with the reader’s horizon. Literary criticism sought to bring together text and reader, but started from a detailed analysis of the text which therefore required an ideal reader. Cultural studies, on the other hand, makes the reader dominant, but at the expense of not connecting with text or author. Village argues that scholarly biblical study avoids any real application of interpretation to the life of the reader. ‘To a large extent, academic exploration of the Bible remains wary of the notion that the text might speak with an authority to readers that lies beyond the text or its human author.’<sup>481</sup>

J. Todd Billings believes that reading the Bible is to enter an ongoing drama, a journey of faith seeking understanding, guided by a map of ‘the rule of faith’. But we also always bring our own map to Scripture, our own theological predispositions. There is no neutral reader. The call to *Sola Scriptura* is often misunderstood as an appeal to ignore everything except Scripture: in fact, it was rather to say that the rule of faith must finally be biblical in character. But this

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<sup>477</sup> van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 46-7.

<sup>478</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translation edited by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>479</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), xix.

<sup>480</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 226.

<sup>481</sup> Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 81.



‘rule’ is not as clear as it sounds. It sets wide boundaries and limits which allows for (and indeed can facilitate) multiple interpretations.<sup>482</sup> Following Gadamer, Billings argues that whether we realise it or not, we all read with the lens of tradition because we are not the only readers to read a particular text. In fact, traditions ‘open up deeper, more penetrating possibilities for textual understanding than we could have on our own. In addition, in terms of reading Scripture, traditions join us together with the “cloud of witness” (Heb. 12:1) and the work of the Spirit through the centuries.’<sup>483</sup> The key question for Christian readers of Scripture, according to Billings, is therefore to realise which tradition(s) are operative.

Nicholas Lash (against Krister Stendahl<sup>484</sup>) argues that there is no method to determine the original meaning of a text which does not entail interpretation. He also questions Stendahl’s imprecise concept of ‘meaning’. What does the ‘original meaning’ of the text refer to? Is it what Luke or Paul actually wrote, or what they were in their own minds trying to express, or what the original audience of the text perceived it to be? Lash also accuses Stendahl of using a false ‘relay race’ analogy of the relationship between the biblical scholar and the systematic theologian: the baton of pure historical information is handed over to the systematic theologian to be made use of in the next stage of the interpretive enterprise. Lash argues that an understanding of our past is important, but so too is a critical understanding of our present. ‘We do not *first* understand the past and *then* proceed to understand the present. The relationship between these two dimensions of our quest for meaning and truth is dialectical; they mutually inform, enable, correct and enlighten each other’. Lash believes that the NT authors sought to respond to fundamental questions of life and death, innocence and freedom, hope and suffering, in terms available to them within their cultural horizons; and if they are to be ‘heard’ with something like their original force they have to be ‘heard’ as questions that challenge us.

And if they are to be thus heard, they must first be articulated in terms available to us within *our* cultural horizons. There is thus a sense in which

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<sup>482</sup> J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 23-4.

<sup>483</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 47-8.

<sup>484</sup> Krister Stendahl, ‘Biblical Theology, Contemporary’, in *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 418-32.

the articulation of what the text might ‘mean’ today is a necessary condition of hearing what that text ‘originally meant’.<sup>485</sup>

So the interpretation of a text must involve some consideration of more than simply what the author might, or might not, have originally intended. What the text ‘actually meant then’ is not a simple, nor perhaps even a meaningful question to ask. Perhaps the real question is ‘what does it mean now’, and in getting to this we must involve a wider set of considerations than the text itself. Even if we could be sure what the text actually meant in its original setting, this does not mean that it is necessarily correct or intelligible to simply transpose this meaning to today. What was written in and for the world view of the author must be reconsidered in light of the world view of the reader. I suggest that this can be seen most clearly with regard to how the ‘physical’ is seen by Wright and two scientist theologians who support his view.

## AUTHORIAL WORLD VIEWS AND CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE

The eschatological approach of Wright, Wilkinson<sup>486</sup> and Polkinghorne<sup>487</sup> is based on the *physical* resurrection of Jesus and the commitment of a faithful God to his physical creation; both of which mean that the physical cosmos will be renewed and restored as the new heavens and the new earth. Several key passages (including Romans 8:18-30, 1 Cor. 15, 2 Cor. 5:1-10, Col. 1:15-20, 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11, 2 Peter 3:10-13 and Revelation 21) are interpreted in support of this view. However, the authors of these key passages of Scripture were dependent on a world view vastly different from that provided by modern science. As Badham points out, the difficulty is that ‘the apocalyptic imagination of the first century is the only basis for such an expectation, and key elements in that understanding of reality are utterly different from our own.’<sup>488</sup>

Badham is not unusual in claiming that Paul expected the eschaton in his lifetime. For Paul, this was a reasonable view given that he thought the existing (three-decker) universe had been created by God in its current state only several thousand years before. ‘What could be more natural than that God who had created this cosmos in the relatively recent past should also destroy and remake it

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<sup>485</sup> Nicholas Lash, ‘What Might Martyrdom Mean?’, in his *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 80-1.

<sup>486</sup> David Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010).

<sup>487</sup> Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*.

<sup>488</sup> Badham, ‘Concepts of Heaven and Hell’, in Jupp (ed.) *Death, Our Future*, 97.

in the relatively near future?’<sup>489</sup> This is, of course, a quite different assumption to make in light of modern scientific knowledge about an immense space-time universe which has evolved and expanded in an extraordinary fashion from a completely alien initial state some 14 billion years ago. There are two related issues here. First, to what extent can the original authorial intention still be considered as meaningful or ‘true’ for us today, given the very different (even mistaken) world view that obtained then? Second, is the assumption of a recreated physical cosmos still reasonable given contemporary cosmology? This is an issue which I believe the scientist-theologians<sup>490</sup> actually misconstrue by an over-reliance on a scientific world view.

Wilkinson states that his work ‘shares with Wright’s *Surprised by Hope* a passion for the importance and centrality of bodily resurrection to Christian hope, but wants to push further for what this means for the physical universe. What begins to emerge is a re-discovery of one of the central biblical narratives, that of new creation.’<sup>491</sup> He claims, following Polkinghorne, that Christian theology faces a serious challenge from the scientific fact of the final futility of the cosmos (by slow heat death). For Polkinghorne, there is a clear ultimate question. ‘Does the universe make complete sense, not just now but always, or is it in the end, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”?’<sup>492</sup> Elsewhere, he remarks that ‘eschatology is the keystone of the edifice of theological thinking, holding the whole building together.’<sup>493</sup> Polkinghorne believes that Christian belief provides the essential resource for answering this fundamental question, with hope of a destiny beyond death resting ultimately on the faithfulness of God

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<sup>489</sup> Badham, *Christian Beliefs*, 89.

<sup>490</sup> Note that by the term ‘scientist-theologians’ I am referring in particular to the physicist-theologians Polkinghorne and Wilkinson, and not to all scientist-theologians. This is perhaps most obvious with regard to biologist-theologians such as Arthur Peacocke, who sees modern developments in the physical sciences through the biologically informed lens of evolution rather than the cosmological spectacles of Wilkinson and Polkinghorne. Like Polkinghorne, he notes the development of remarkable complexity in the world, and the mystery of comprehension by human beings of this world. But his biological/evolutionary emphasis leads him to panentheism and a conception of God acting by ‘whole-part influence’ on the physical cosmos. The universe is an ‘epic of evolution’ which allows the emergence of self-conscious beings, and Christ is the evolutionary future of such beings. Death and suffering are intimately related to how evolution has to work; not ‘red in tooth and claw’, but rather as the necessary way that existing beings give way to future generations to facilitate novelty and development. God creates, continually, in and through the evolutionary processes (of stars and cells). See, for example, his *Paths from Science Towards God: the End of All Our Exploring* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001) and ‘Biology and a Theology of Evolution’, *Zygon* 34, no. 4 (1999).

<sup>491</sup> Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology*, x.

<sup>492</sup> John Polkinghorne, ‘Eschatology: Some Questions and Insights from Science’, in Polkinghorne and Welker (eds.), *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, 32.

<sup>493</sup> Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 140.

as Creator. This is a key point because it is only the case that the ultimate death of the physical cosmos is problematic *if* one assumes that God must redeem and restore the whole physical creation in order to remain faithful.

I find this to be an interesting assumption for scientist-theologians to make,<sup>494</sup> for, as Wilkinson points out very clearly, ‘without a future of futility the Universe would not have had the balances in law and circumstances necessary for intelligent life to develop. Here is an important insight that life brings with it death.’<sup>495</sup> In other words, modern science shows us that the scale, age and wastefulness of the universe are necessary preconditions for the development of intelligent life in at least one place. The wastefulness of the universe can be seen in our evolutionary understanding both of the physical cosmos (generations of stars dying and seeding the next, creating heavier elements and solar systems) and of organic life (the vast majority of all species that have ever lived are extinct, and the animal suffering involved in evolution).<sup>496</sup> Furthermore, modern science also emphasises the fragility and temporality of human life on this planet: a home base which will eventually be completely destroyed by an expanding sun, but is threatened in the much shorter (immediate) term by everything from asteroid strike, through super-volcanoes and magnetic pole-shifts, to environmental or nuclear disaster.

As a person not formally trained as a scientist,<sup>497</sup> it is quite remarkable to me that a perfectly reasonable interpretation of modern cosmology seems to be overlooked by the scientist-theologians themselves: that God actually values above all else the emergence of human life, to which end he has expended in an extraordinarily abundant and generous way the vast physical resources of the created cosmos. Perhaps God sees the physical creation as basically a means to the end of intelligent life, and the cosmos is therefore of immense value only in

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<sup>494</sup> Wilkinson’s acceptance of Wright’s emphasis on the bodily resurrection of Jesus leads him to argue ‘that unless the resurrection of Jesus is seen in terms of physicality, then the creation becomes unimportant and indeed irrelevant to thinking about the future.’ (*Christian Eschatology*, 90) This is a further key assumption: that the physical resurrection of Jesus indicates the importance of the physical creation itself. This study found that ordinary theologians see a quite different meaning in Jesus’ bodily resurrection (see above pages 91ff.).

<sup>495</sup> Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology*, 16.

<sup>496</sup> See Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). Southgate fully accepts the Darwinian explanation of evolution, and uses multiple approaches to produce a ‘compound theodicy’ which suggests that God values all creatures in redemptive eschatological terms, and that human beings may have a role to play with God in the healing of the evolutionary process.

<sup>497</sup> I am, though, very interested in cosmology and science in general, and seek to follow the major debates in a critically reflective way. In this sense I believe I am an ‘ordinary scientist’.

that sense. The huge time spans, and the necessary physical and organic evolutionary processes, are perhaps the (necessary) way God has enabled the eventual creation of human beings (and possibly other intelligent life).<sup>498</sup> Of the immense life-span of this universe before its heat-death as a sea of photons, perhaps it is *this* time that is the point, the focus. This era of the universe (the ‘star’ era) is the one which is compatible with life emerging, but it is only a tiny fraction of the predicted life of the physical cosmos. Physicists too easily convey a very linear impression of the value of time, where equal amounts of time are assumed to be equally important. But perhaps the universe in its entirety could be thought of as a ‘soul nursery’, analogous to the nebula ‘star nurseries’ which science currently observes?

Of course this can sound anthropocentric and humanly arrogant, but those who claim that the whole cosmos must be redeemed and transformed by God also sound cosmocentric and cosmologically arrogant. Science constantly tells us of the wonder and beauty of the immense physical cosmos; but it is also a hugely violent, empty, alien environment about which we still actually know very little (dark matter and energy for example). What is really being added to the theological discussion of human destiny beyond death by such a perspective? Is it simply a projection of scientific importance by committed scientists? Keith Ward reminds us that ‘the real world is the world of sights, sounds, thoughts, feelings, people and animals; not the world of quarks and gluons or of molecules and amino acids.’ Such things are, of course, part of the real world; but they have been ‘artificially separated off by special, technical concepts, in the attempt to enable us to understand how it works. The world of the laws of physics is an abstract, other-things-being-equal world.’<sup>499</sup>

Paul was not a modern cosmologist. What he points to in Romans 8 is not a clear commitment by God ultimately to transform and redeem this vast physical

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<sup>498</sup> The question of whether there is other intelligent life in the universe remains completely open. It is by no means sure, even in the vast expanse of the cosmos, that the particular set of circumstances which have made such life possible here on earth have been repeated elsewhere; or if it has, that those conditions have persisted long enough for the necessary evolution of such life. Even if life has developed elsewhere, resulting in technological civilisations which are coterminous with us, the difficulty of contact across the vast empty reaches of inter-stellar space means that we will remain unaware of them. It seems to me a reasonable assumption to make that, in effect or in reality, humankind is alone in this universe.

<sup>499</sup> Ward, *In Defence of the Soul*, 53.

cosmos (of which he was not aware),<sup>500</sup> but rather that God would ultimately transform and redeem human life as lived in the (to him) small and young physical world. This clear human scale has perhaps been lost in our eager embrace of modern scientific insight, where billions of years and millions of light years roll from tongues very easily. Wilkinson claims that theologians generally have not taken seriously the end of the universe, typically showing ‘a shallow interaction with the scriptural material referring to the future of the physical universe and an overemphasis on the future of the person compared to the future of the Universe itself.’<sup>501</sup> He comments that one of the reasons for this is that it is hard for people to see what relevance it has for them if the universe ends in 100 billion years. Yes, exactly. Wilkinson and Polkinghorne fail to appreciate the force of this observation for non-scientists.<sup>502</sup>

An important way that Polkinghorne conceives of the new creation is in terms of *continuity* and *discontinuity* between it and this present creation. ‘The nature of the discontinuities will be the province of theology, but the nature and degree of the continuities, required by consistency if the eschatological world is to be truly a resurrected world, are things on which science may hope to comment to some degree, and even contribute some modest insight into the form of coherent possibility.’<sup>503</sup> This is a significant claim. The assumption is that if the new creation is to be physical, made of the transformed stuff of this cosmos, then the current insights of science should allow us to make reasonable comments about its nature. Nancey Murphy, in complete contrast, says the laws of nature of the current creation are actually ‘fallen creatures’ of God (they are our masters rather than servants, and prevent us from living a genuinely free and loving life) so they must be radically transformed to permit the fullness of life which God intends. So

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<sup>500</sup> To interpret Paul in this way is to commit the kind of mistake that David Brown points to, concerning apparent hidden meanings within Scripture that are just waiting to be discovered at a later point.

<sup>501</sup> Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology*, 24-5.

<sup>502</sup> David Brown argues that it is no wonder theologians have failed to gain popular acceptance for the idea of a bodily resurrection in some distant eschatologically renewed order of a new heaven and new earth. ‘For what reason has the present “me” to take an interest in a very different “me” in a radically different world, possibly millions of years distant, especially as in the interim either nothing of me survives or what does “sleeps”?’ David Brown, ‘The Christian Heaven’, in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, and Christopher Lewis (eds.), *Beyond Death: Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Life after Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 43.

<sup>503</sup> Polkinghorne, ‘Eschatology: Some Questions and Insights from Science’, 29-30.

the ability of science to extrapolate our current laws of nature into the afterlife is severely limited.<sup>504</sup>

This optimistic and promising assumption of Polkinghorne soon runs into difficulty. Key aspects of continuity for Polkinghorne are embodiment, temporality, process and personhood.<sup>505</sup> For a human being to be the same human being after death, a body living in time and subject to change (perfection is not static) is essential. Apparently the afterlife will involve music (Polkinghorne argues that such human achievement could not simply be lost), which requires time. However, if we have change then what stops evil and suffering from happening again? The answer is that ‘In the clear light of the divine presence, shining in the new creation, such disastrous errors will no longer be possible. We shall see the good, and freely and totally consent to it. Our wills and desires will be turned by love.’<sup>506</sup> Similarly with the potential problems of physical decay and ageing: ‘the world to come must be so constituted that its processes are temporal without generating transience, their outcomes fruitful without pain and suffering being their shadow side.’ Polkinghorne admits that ‘It is beyond our powers to imagine the details of such a world, but it clearly seems to me to be a coherent possibility.’<sup>507</sup> What this amounts to is fantastic science-based speculation on a new state of physical existence. It is at least as fantastic as the views of John Hick, Paul Badham, or H. H. Price, as well as some of the ordinary theologians who contributed to this study.

Polkinghorne claims that ‘While there is a necessary tentativity about the details of much Christian eschatological thinking, there is also a theological indispensability about the quest for as coherent and credible an articulation of the Ends of God as we can manage to achieve.’<sup>508</sup> I agree with this. However, scientist-theologians may not be adding as much to our theological understanding as they claim. There is a danger that scientific conjecture may distort our eschatological eyesight if we wear only the spectacles of modern science. From the perspective of an ‘ordinary scientist’, one of the clearest things I take from the

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<sup>504</sup> Murphy, ‘The Resurrection Body and Personal Identity’, 218.

<sup>505</sup> Summarised by Southgate as table 10.1 in Christopher Southgate *et al.*, *God, Humanity, and the Cosmos* (London: T & T Clark, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2005), 296.

<sup>506</sup> Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 134.

<sup>507</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (London: SPCK, 2004), 163–4.

<sup>508</sup> Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope*, 138.

modern state of cosmology is just how fast it is changing and how many new and competing theories are emerging. The classic ‘Big Bang’ view is now being challenged even by its original supporters such as Roger Penrose, and we have not only the huge ‘gaps’ of dark matter and energy, but also serious proponents of such varied cosmological models as ‘Big Bounce’, ‘String’ theory, colliding ‘membranes’, eternal inflation from ‘Swiss cheese’, and an evolutionary ‘multiverse’ based on black holes. Perhaps we need to be humble and realise that we are glimpsing another partial vision of the whole, as we do with our interpretation of Scripture.

## CONTRASTING AND COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS

Key biblical texts concerning LAD are interpreted in quite different ways by different scholars. This is no surprise to those of us academically trained in theology, or, as we have seen, to these ordinary theologians. However, the point I wish to explore further is the basis upon which such differing interpretations are made. What is striking about the literature is that arguments from the texts themselves are (of course) very quickly supplemented, or even replaced by wider considerations: of context and historical background; of the overall theological position of Paul, or a Gospel writer, or indeed the whole New Testament; or of arguments that are necessary to support other related theological principles and conclusions. There is remarkably little consensus on such interpretation. In other words, the different prejudices which different scholars bring to the same text contribute to different interpretations. As we have seen above, how could this be otherwise?

There is actually relatively little information in the NT concerning the state of Christians immediately following death. Murray Harris argues that this results from a focus on the eventual end point of resurrection rather than the expectation of an imminent parousia. ‘Their main attention was focused on the ultimate, not the penultimate, stage of the divine plan.’<sup>509</sup> Nevertheless, scholars speculate at great length about 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5. Paul’s view of ‘body’ is a classic example. 1 Cor. 15:44 contrasts ‘*soma pneumatikon*’ and ‘*soma psychikon*’, which are often translated as ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual’ bodies. Wright, among others, believes this translation to be deficient. He makes the point by

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<sup>509</sup> Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 142.



suggesting that the term should be a ‘soulish’ rather than a physical body, reflecting its origin from *psyche*.<sup>510</sup> The contrast is between *two bodies*, the present mortal and corruptible one which decays at death, and the one which we will receive at the future resurrection.<sup>511</sup> Wright is clear that this later body is ‘spiritual’ in the sense of it being animated by God’s Spirit, suitable for the era of the Spirit, rather than for the present. It does not mean a wispy, non-corporeal state: flesh and blood will not be abolished. The contrast is ‘between *corruptible physicality* on the one hand and *non-corruptible physicality* on the other.’<sup>512</sup> However, resurrection also involves transformation from bodies which die and decompose, to bodies which are not subject to decay. C. K. Barrett, like Wright, is clear that 1 Cor. 15:50 shows that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, because *as we are*, without transformation, we are incapable of living in the new (spiritual) age of the kingdom. This does not mean that physicality per se plays no part in the final age, but that we need a new body for this age, a ‘spiritual’ body.<sup>513</sup>

But this still does not tell us much about what the (correctly understood) ‘spiritual body’ is actually like. Assuming that the only form of this body that has existed so far is the resurrected body of Jesus, then we face the issue of the notoriously ‘strange’ nature of the recorded perceptions of this body (Jesus appearing and disappearing, and not being easily recognised), and whether Paul saw the same thing (compare James Dunn<sup>514</sup>). Wright does not help by overextending his argument in the enthusiasm of emphasising the *bodiliness* of the *soma psychikon*. This new mode of physicality (post-resurrection) ‘will be as

<sup>510</sup> Marcus J. Borg, and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (London: SPCK, 1999), 120.

<sup>511</sup> John Barclay points out that the interpretation of *soma* in this context is by no means straightforward. 1 Cor. 15:42 talks of the resurrection of *the dead*, not *the body*; and the ‘it’ which is sown perishable but raised imperishable in 15:42-4 is not clear. ‘The difficulty in determining Paul’s meaning at this point suggests that it is unwise to be dogmatic about what he, or other early Christians, understood to be the physical effects of resurrection.’ John M. G. Barclay, ‘The Resurrection in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship’, in Gavin D’Costa (ed.), *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 17-18.

<sup>512</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 167-8.

<sup>513</sup> Barrett, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 379.

<sup>514</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and The Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) [first published 1975 by SCM, London], 95-109. Dunn believes a telling point is that in 1 Cor. 15:35 Paul does not say that our resurrection body will be like the resurrection body of Jesus, which was his most obvious riposte to those who doubted the resurrection of the body. Tom Wright is far clearer that Paul actually saw the resurrected physical Jesus, and argues that the three accounts from Luke in Acts should bear little weight compared to what Paul said in his epistles. See his *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 375-98.

much more real, more firmed up, more bodily, than our present body as our present body is more substantial, more touchable, than a disembodied spirit.’<sup>515</sup> Or again, ‘The new world will be more real, more physically solid, than the present one.’<sup>516</sup> But why should it be *more* like this physicality if it really is a complete transformation of the current cosmos? Surely there is a great range of possible new forms of existence that are not just like ‘more of the same’. Perhaps continuity here is being emphasised at the expense of discontinuity.

Peter Lampe believes that the new bodily state of the resurrected is ‘unnatural’, that is, ‘something beyond the possibilities inherent in the present creation.’<sup>517</sup> But if this is the case, then surely Wright overemphasises the ‘more of the same’ view. The grain analogy also points to this conclusion: the flower/plant is continuous with the seed, but can be vastly different. 1 Cor. 15:42-44 show how big such differences are: for instance, mortal compared to immortal. According to Lampe, all that Paul wants to convey with his term ‘spiritual body’ is that ‘God’s Spirit is the *only* force that creates the new body. The creation of this new body is totally beyond all the possibilities of the present nature and creation.’ For Lampe this means that he therefore cannot see (unlike Polkinghorne) ‘how the natural sciences could help us to understand the totally different nature of this future body – unless natural science were able to transcend the nature of this universe.’<sup>518</sup> Paul says our spiritual body will be very similar (conformed to) that of the resurrected Christ (Phil. 3:21), but gives no further details. Lampe believes Luke only pretends to know details such as that the resurrected body of Christ can consume fish (Lk. 24:43).

Murray Harris is clear that whatever the state of the person in the interim period (disembodied or not), ‘the ultimate destiny of the Christian is not emancipation from all corporeality but the acquisition of a superior form of embodiment that will perfectly mediate consciousness of the presence of the Lord.’<sup>519</sup> He believes this to be undoubtedly the majority position among biblical scholars, with few seriously questioning that the New Testament sees a final resurrected and embodied destiny as the future of humankind. However, as we

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<sup>515</sup> Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 166.

<sup>516</sup> Wright, *New Heavens*, 14.

<sup>517</sup> Peter Lampe, ‘Paul’s Concept of a Spiritual Body’, in Peters, Russell, and Welker (eds.), *Resurrection*, 105-6.

<sup>518</sup> Lampe, ‘Paul’s Concept of a Spiritual Body’, 109.

<sup>519</sup> Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 142.

have already seen, there is a subsequent question that must be asked: even if such a view were true for the authors of the New Testament, is this still the appropriate view for today? To what extent does our current and very different world view make possible a different understanding of embodiment?

The ‘two visions’ publication by Marcus Borg and Tom Wright provides a direct comparison of their two biblical interpretations. They could not be more different. Borg, for example, argues that Paul thinks of the resurrection appearances of Jesus as apparitions, and considers the threefold narration of the Damascus Road experience in Acts as definitive, showing the nature of this experience to be a vision. With regard to the spiritual body, Borg agrees with Wright that the Greek means literally a body animated by soul or spirit, ‘Yet the context suggests to me that the contrast “physical body” and “spiritual body” does express what Paul means.’ Paul makes it clear that the ‘soulish body’ is flesh and blood and perishable: in other words, what we understand by a physical body. The other body is none of these things, it is completely different. Borg believes the seed analogy of Paul emphasises this point. ‘The physical body is to the resurrection body as a seed is to a full-grown plant. Continuity: the seed becomes plant. Discontinuity: a full-grown plant looks radically different from the seed.’ So, ‘Whether Paul’s language points to a new mode of physicality (as Tom suggests) is indeterminate, it seems to me. *Perhaps we need to take seriously that Paul thought there are spiritual bodies that are not physical* [emphasis added].’<sup>520</sup>

What these contrasting visions show, of course, is that there is no single correct answer that can simply be read from the text, if only we had the right tools or understanding to unlock the original, definitive meaning. As I show above, we cannot come ‘neutral’ to the text. Our interpretation, whether consciously acknowledged or not, is at least as much determined by our own theological predispositions as by anything that the text ‘really’ says. It is perfectly obvious that Borg and Wright bring very different prejudices to the same text. Borg interprets 1 Cor. 15 from the perspective of *already believing*, on other complex

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<sup>520</sup> Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 132-3. A similar interpretation of *soma pneumatikon* and the seed analogy is made by Gooch, who argues that disembodied afterlife existence is logically and exegetically defensible. P. W. Gooch, ‘On Disembodied Resurrected Persons: A Study in the Logic of Christian Eschatology’, *Religious Studies* 17, no. 2 (1981), 199-213. See also Paul Helm, ‘A Theory of Disembodied Survival and Re-embodied Existence’ *Religious Studies* 14, no.1 (1978), 15-26, who argues for the survival of a ‘minimal person’ post-mortem in disembodied form (against Terence Penelhum).

and extra-textual grounds, that Jesus' resurrection was not physical. Wright, of course, does the opposite.

Another remarkable set of contrasting interpretations of key biblical texts is clearly seen in the debate between Joel Green and John Cooper, which focuses on philosophical questions regarding disembodied existence and the soul. Joel Green is clear that contemporary neuroscience calls into question the concept of the soul as a separate ontological entity, but he also believes that modern biblical studies are leading us in the same way: that is, away from any form of body-soul dualism and toward monism. He claims that Cooper's use of the NT to claim a disembodied intermediate state 'would represent at best a minority report among biblical scholars of the last century or so.'<sup>521</sup> However, both Lampe and Cullmann emphasise that the key thing about the interim period is that the 'me' is actually with Christ, not just in his memory; it is relational.<sup>522</sup> That is, the intermediate state is a conscious disembodied existence. In fact, Christ is our only relationship at this time, and Paul describes this 'reduced relational existence' as 'sleeping' (peace and rest from his apostolic struggles?). David Brown, of course (see 'Continuing Revelation' on page 26) argues that because social existence is such a key factor of human being, then the interim period must also include a communion of saints.<sup>523</sup> Lampe believes it was important for Paul to believe that if he died before the resurrection, he would still be with Christ. The disembodied state is a 'naked' state, without the new spiritual body. Those who are still alive when the parousia happens will not be in a naked state, which is what Paul had been hoping for. These people will have their new spiritual body put on over their old (1 Thess. 4:17).<sup>524</sup> Lampe believes that Paul refused to enter into speculation about post-mortem life (despite Hellenistic concepts abounding); he is happy just to say that 'I' will survive with Christ. Paul practices 'theological asceticism'.<sup>525</sup>

With regard to 2 Cor. 5, Green gives a quite different interpretation. Paul is arguing that the new form of bodily existence is not to be traded for the old, but is to subsume the old. We have put on Christ in baptism, the transformation has already begun, and we do not want to be found 'naked' (that is without evidence

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<sup>521</sup> Joel B. Green, 'What Does It Mean to Be Human? Another Chapter in the Ongoing Interaction of Science and Scripture', in Jeeves (ed.), *From Cells to Souls*, 188.

<sup>522</sup> Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*

<sup>523</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 395-6. The full argument is in chapter 3 of this volume.

<sup>524</sup> Lampe, 'Paul's Concept of a Spiritual Body', footnote 19, 112-13.

<sup>525</sup> Lampe, 'Paul's Concept of a Spiritual Body', 114.

of this transformation) at death when we are judged. ‘Paul’s language is dualistic in an eschatological, not an anthropological, sense. ... Paul’s concern is not with thanatology per se, but with resurrection hope.’ For Paul, transformation and immortality are the consequence of, rather than the preparation for, resurrection. Nothing in the human person is intrinsically immortal.<sup>526</sup> Green also points to the relational importance of Paul talking of our being ‘with Christ’ or ‘in Christ’. Paul does not use words like spirit or soul to express personal identity. When we die, we really do die, not just biologically, it is ‘the conclusion of embodied life, the severance of all relationships, and the fading of personal narrative.’ So nothing about us is capable of traversing death; it is God’s doing, and Paul hints that it is something relational with Christ. ‘This suggests that the relationality and narrativity that constitute who I am are able to exist apart from neural correlates and embodiment only insofar as they are preserved in God’s own being, in anticipation of new creation.’<sup>527</sup>

This implies that we are only ‘alive’ in a subjective sense after death, as remembered by (continuing to relate to) the living Christ. Physical resurrection in the new glorified body is the next living moment of the Christian dead. Charles Gutenson argues, however, that such an interim time may not be necessary if on death we experience time as God does (which is in a Trinitarian eternalist way – the Father transcends all time, while the Son and Spirit enter temporal location to bring about salvation). So for the dead, taken up into this divine eternity, their resurrection would be just as present to them as their death. There would be no need for an interim period or intermediate state.<sup>528</sup> Elsewhere, Green argues (against Cooper) that Luke 16:9-31 (Lazarus in Hades) is not about a disembodied interim state, but actually shows a form of corporeal and social existence.<sup>529</sup>

In stark contrast to Green, John Cooper<sup>530</sup> argues that the Bible indicates that we do not cease to exist between death and resurrection, and there is neither ‘soul sleep’ nor immediate resurrection. Cooper claims, rather, that we can exist at least

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<sup>526</sup> Green, ‘What Does it Mean’, 193.

<sup>527</sup> Joel B. Green ‘Resurrection of the Body: New Testament Voices Concerning Personal Continuity and the Afterlife’, in Green (ed.), *What about the Soul?*, 100.

<sup>528</sup> Charles E. Gutenson, ‘Time, Eternity, and Personal Identity: The Implications of Trinitarian Theology’ in Green (ed.), *What about the Soul?*, 117-32.

<sup>529</sup> Joel B. Green ‘Bodies- That Is, Human Lives’: A Re-Examination of Human Nature in the Bible’ in Brown, Murphy, and Malony, (eds.), *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* 149-74.

<sup>530</sup> John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

temporarily without our bodies, although we are meant for bodies, and physical resurrection is the Christian hope. His view is therefore ‘holistic dualism’. Cooper says the Pauline metaphor of sleep means a conscious intermediate state, and the use of ‘sleep’ in 1Thess. 4:13-18 and 1Cor. 15:18, 20, 51 refers to such a state. There are those (Green) who claim that historical Christianity mistakenly reads anthropological dualism into Scripture, but Cooper claims that ‘The scholarly community has become highly suspicious – almost paranoid – of the presence of Platonic dualism in the traditional interpretation of Scripture.’<sup>531</sup> Cooper is clear that an intermediate state must entail dualism, and he argues that many who hold a traditional view of the afterlife are unwilling to admit this. I suggest Wright is in this category. Of course, we need to be clear what we mean by dualism.

Cooper argues that the New Testament says little about LAD. However, it does say that we will still be with Christ, as we are now; and from this modest biblical teaching certain other things necessarily follow, ‘*for they are contained in or entailed by its truth* [emphasis added]’. For example, ‘if I am with Christ, then I – my essential selfhood or core personality – must survive physical death. ... I must somehow be aware of myself as the same person who formerly lived on earth’. This is not philosophical speculation, ‘*It is merely unpacking the content of biblical teaching* [emphasis added]. ... Personal existence apart from earthly-bodily existence is possible. ... We are constituted in such a way that we can survive “coming apart” at death, unnatural as this may be. This is all that I mean by “dualism”’.<sup>532</sup>

What drives these hugely contrasting biblical interpretations is the theological presuppositions which these scholars bring, in this case differing philosophical conceptions of the human person (rather than differing views of the physicality of Jesus’ resurrection, as for Wright and Borg). Paul Badham claims that ‘there is a very intimate relationship between a man’s interpretation of the New Testament, and what he believes essential to personal identity, and necessary for personal existence beyond the grave’. The way one interprets Jesus’ resurrection ‘depends, to a great extent, on the conclusions one comes to on other grounds about the likelihood of a bodily resurrection, and the validity of the

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<sup>531</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting*, 34. See Appendix G ‘The influence of Greek Philosophy’ page 210.

<sup>532</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting*, 161-3.

concept of the soul'.<sup>533</sup> This is seen clearly in Badham's own biblical approach. He accepts that the Easter faith is historically real, but questions the physicality of the resurrection of Jesus, seeing the New Testament reports of the sightings of Jesus as 'veridical hallucinations' rather than sightings of a physical person. He points to the nature of the reports themselves for evidence of this: the fact that Jesus was not recognised at first (Emmaus being a good example); that 'some doubted' (Mt. 28:17); that Jesus appeared and disappeared from locked rooms; the Pauline conversion stories and the fact that Paul himself lists his own experience of Jesus alongside all the others, which (contra Wright) 'suggests that Paul regarded the appearances of Jesus as visionary experiences rather than objective seeings'.<sup>534</sup> Badham rejects the empty tomb tradition and the evidence of Jesus eating and drinking, as being a later tradition. He also suggests that we should take at face value the claim of Paul that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50), and claims that 2 Cor. 5:6-8 is language which 'seems quite explicitly to identify the person with the soul'.<sup>535</sup> Further, 1 Peter 3:18, 4:6 is clear evidence of our spiritual (non-physical) future.

It is clear that Badham's interpretation of these key passages depends on *his* overall theological position and pre-determined views, as it does for all interpreters. But the point which Badham makes by his interpretive approach is, in effect, to ask 'what does it mean for today?' Consequently, Badham sets out to show that the traditional belief in resurrection of the flesh is based on premises which have now been shown (by modern scientific knowledge) to be mistaken. For example, the early Fathers believed that a full *bodily/physical continuity* was the only way to ensure personal survival. Modern scientific knowledge calls this into question: we now know that our 'particles' constantly renew and change.

Nancey Murphy asks how, and what, can we know about resurrection life?<sup>536</sup> But, of course, her personal preconceptions become immediately apparent. In her view, the philosophical case for mind-body dualism is hopeless, despite the best efforts of Richard Swinburne and three hundred years of post-Cartesian philosophers. The problem of mind-body interaction is essentially insoluble. On the other hand, though, science 'provides as much evidence as could be desired'

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<sup>533</sup> Badham, *Christian Beliefs*, 43.

<sup>534</sup> Badham, *Christian Beliefs*, 26.

<sup>535</sup> Badham, *Christian Beliefs*, 40.

<sup>536</sup> Murphy, 'The Resurrection Body and Personal Identity', 202-18.

to show that there is no need for things such as *substantial* souls or minds. The (non-reductive) physicalist thesis is true.<sup>537</sup> With regard to interpreting biblical evidence, Murphy believes that this must be done in the context of Christian faith and practice (ordinary theology?). She claims that our best (and perhaps only reliable) knowledge of LAD is this interpretive context for the eschatological ‘word pictures’ of the Bible. We must read these eschatological pictures from within the context of the whole gospel, which means that we need ‘to take a stand on the highly contested issue of what Christianity is basically all about, and work from there to a reading of the resurrection pictures.’ She argues that if we start from what is of ultimate importance to Christians in the present, we can gain real insights into what must ultimately be important. In other words, Murphy is applying a kind of ‘continuity’ argument: those things that we experience now as of great importance in earthly Christian life must also be found in the afterlife in order for that life is to make sense and have meaning. So we can know that ‘resurrection bodies must provide all that is necessary to carry forward the moral and social relations that constitute the kingdom of God’, because the kingdom is the heart of Jesus’ message. Resurrection bodies, for Murphy, must therefore be physical; because a body is the only way a soul can communicate with another soul (but see ‘Disembodied Existence’ on page 56).

## CONCLUSION

It is simply not possible to arrive at a definitive position on biblical interpretation from the text alone. A decision cannot be made between competing interpretations on the basis of one having a better grasp of the original meaning and context of the text than another: for not only is there no such pure textual core, but a neutral interpretation of any text is impossible. All interpreters come with their prejudices and preconceptions, although they vary in the extent to which this is openly recognised. So it is at least as important to understand their wider theological perspective, as it is to appraise their textual scholarship. Furthermore, the current world view of interpreters is so different from that of the biblical authors that any pretence at simple extrapolation is surely rendered meaningless.

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<sup>537</sup> For a fuller discussion of her rejection of the dualist view see Appendix G, ‘Variations of Monism’ page 213.



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